The Revolutionary Task of Cinema:
Modernism and Mass Culture in Shanghai and Buenos Aires

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Miłość jest mgłą, która wytwarza się w głowie. Jeśli owa mgła opada na dół—na serce—następuje pogoda życia; jeśli pozostaje w głowie—pada deszcz łez.

Henryk Sienkiewicz

To My Loved Ones: Brown, Gilmer, Linde, Molestina, Sedzielarz, and Triviski

Abstract

This dissertation reconstructs the interconnected cultural histories of film and literature in Shanghai and Buenos Aires in the period 1927-1937. Through readings of previously untranslated texts on film form and film technology by Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938), Roberto Arlt (1900-1942), Mao Dun (pen name of Shen Yanbing, 1896-1981), and Xia Yan (pen name of Shen Naixi, 1900-1995), I identify a movement in cinepoetics common to Latin America and East Asia that mobilized local popular culture for global working-class political goals. My research investigates into key points in the history of the encounter between cinema and literature in these two cities and links internationalist movements in revolutionary politics with the vibrant film cultures emerging in these two cities—as seen through the eyes of each writer. Through a close textual, visual, and auditory analysis of film clips, film reviews, film-poems, reportage, film-inspired fiction narrative, screenplays, and soundtracks, each case study tracks the work of these writers as they participated in a transpacific intellectual network of anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist politics during the period of rising fascism, class conflict, socialist solidarity, and political upheaval in the years prior to the Second World War. My study finds that their experiments with film pushed the boundaries of conventional writing forms and that their writing style and technique incorporated elements of film technology. Moreover, in developing new critical practices of viewing and listening to cinema Storni, Arlt, Mao Dun, and Xia Yan each contributed to a politically engaged internationalist current of cinematic modernism. During this brief period of resistance to the globalized dominance of Hollywood entertainment commodities, each of these writers exemplified the strengthening of a cultural movement based in cinema, which

presented the cinematic experience as grounds for a renewed modern social experience with the potential to radically disrupt sociopolitical formations of class, nation, and state. As a collaboratively produced and collectively consumed cultural form, cinema presented each of these writers with a means for reinventing political thought in ways that embraced the intricacies of urban life in cities on the periphery of globalized circuits of capital. Linked by an attention to film as a politically volatile fusion of mass art and mass spectacle—an attention that, at key moments, gave these writers common cause in resisting cultural exports that extended the reach of European and American empire—my study discovers these radical intellectuals as leaders in a transpacific cultural front that ultimately aimed at establishing cinema as a mass art that could unify worldwide movements against the capitalist exploitation of the working classes.

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"The World of Make-Believe," The Autocracy of the System and the Global Hollywood Cartel: The 1929 Capitalist Crisis and the Consolidation of the Hollywood Entertainment Empires

The film is a silent salesman of great effectiveness...through American motion pictures the ideals, culture, customs, and traditions of the United States are gradually undermining those of other countries"

Clarence Jackson North "Our Silent Ambassador" *Independent*, June 12th, 1926

In the short time in which sound films have been commodities [商品], we have seen a rich uniting of song and dance in these films...It is very clear that these films expose the very bones of the trumpets and drums of the resurgence of a powerful movement of Americanism as a kind of weapon!"

Xia Yan, *Shen Bao* newspaper, December 25th, 1933

The passions that the cinematograph—in total—provokes, awakens, and sharpens in these towns, create problems alongside everyday life that don't have a possibility of solution except in large cities, where the expansions of personality escape the control of the family...Cinema is realizing a revolutionary task, in these backward towns, where a bookseller would die of hunger.

Imagine: New York represented in an hour on the white screen of the 'Cine La Paz.' Berlin in La Paz, Monaco in La Paz, Paris in La Paz, Buenos Aires in La Paz! The film, a tempting devil…[it] exhibits the audaciousness of remote cities, the sentimental diversions that are permitted for others...In this it reproduces the torture of tantalus. Satisfaction all the more anxious for the fact that it is impossible to attain.

A film ends, but the little arena of passion that its images put into suspension remains fixed inside the consciousness of men and women.

Roberto Arlt, "Cinema in These Little Towns" *El Mundo*, August 30th, 1933[1]

In an editorial arguing against laws in Britain and France that would limit the importation and screening of U.S. films, U.S. Commerce Department official Clarence Jackson North clearly perceives cinema's global power as a "silent salesman," lying at an intersection of

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

culture, capital, and indoctrination. North describes the resistance to American films as part of a campaign against "a subtle Americanization process." North was billed as a "motion-picture specialist of the Department of Commerce."[2] However, North was not merely a specialist relegated to a basement office in Washington, but part of a highly organized coordination between the U.S. government and Hollywood studios that held high priority for the Department of Commerce. Moreover, the joint effort was growing in strength and organization.

North was a key figure in the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, which had established close connections with Will H. Hays, the former Postmaster General and Chairman of the National Committee of the Republican Party who had assumed leadership of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) in 1922. In the 1920s, the U.S. State Department was also actively involved in the promotion of U.S. films abroad. In 1929, Mary Pickford returned from a world tour that included a visit to Shanghai—part of a trip that was paid for by the U.S. State Department. Upon her return, she stated: "the cheering crowds of the Far East were shouting not for me, but for the American motion picture and the American people and for the world of make-believe."[3]

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[2]C. J. North, "Our Silent Ambassadors." *The Independent,* June 12 (1926), 689-699. Ulf Jonas Bjork also quotes the *Independent* article and describes North's role in the Department of Commerce in "The U.S. Commerce Department Aids Hollywood Exports, 1921 -1933," *Historian* 62, no. 3 (March 2000), 577-578. For a comprehensive study of the creation of U.S. foreign policy around the interests of Hollywood studios in the European context during this period see Ian Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. "Part 3: The U.S. Motion Picture Industry and its Overseas System." For a recent study on the competition for global influence waged through diplomacy and foreign policy that benefited cinema industries in the U.S. and Europe, see John Trumpbour, *Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[3] Quoted in Matthew Fraser, "American Pop Culture as Soft Power: Movies and Broadcasting," in *Soft Power Superpowers*, eds. Yasushi Watanabe and David McConnell (London: Routledge, 2008), 175.

Figure I.1 Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford pictured with actors and filmmakers from the Mingxing Film Studio in Shanghai in 1929. *Shehui Ribao* (Shanghai), Dec. 16, 1929.

Constructing and selling a "world of make believe" around the globe was important to the interests of both Hollywood studios and U.S. politicians throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. These two sectors of the U.S. cultural and political elite had begun what would become a closely intertwined relationship in the early 1920s. U.S. government agencies and the "Big Eight" Hollywood studios worked together to present a version of a dominant but benevolent America to the world as part of the globalization of U.S. capital, culture, and territorial possessions. In a memo to Woodrow Wilson, the head of the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI), a precursor to the MPPDA, communicated that "the motion picture can be the most

wonderful system for spreading the National Propaganda at little or no cost...to place a message in every part of the civilized world."[4]

The NAMPI was eventually succeeded by Hays' MPPDA, an agency that included a dedicated Foreign Relations Committee whose success depended on a close relationship between film studios and the U.S. Department of State. The committee worked with U.S. diplomats to promote the U.S. film industry's interests abroad. Kerry Seagrave notes that Hays brought such a great number of political connections to his role with the MPPDA that "the interlock between government and the film industry [became] almost seamless."[5] Moreover, as Ruth Vasey explains in *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, the Production Code that was instituted under Will Hays—the industry's notoriously strict regulatory limitations on what could be viewed by American audiences—also aimed at enhancing Hollywood interests abroad through the industry's "ability to convince its foreign customers that its output was inoffensive and ideologically neutral."[6] The MPPDA continued to work closely with the Department of Commerce, as had industry representatives in the previous group with North. Herbert Hoover was the acting head of the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce from 1921-1928 and took a special interest in film exports. This affiliation also drew studios into working more closely with each other in order to create a climate friendly to film exports, which mitigated the cutthroat competitiveness that was a rule for Hollywood studios producing films for the U.S. domestic market. With some notable exceptions, the economic push for

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[4] Quoted in Mark Wheeler, *Hollywood: Politics and Society*, (London, British Film Institute, 2006), 14.
[5] Kerry Segrave, *American Films Abroad: Hollywood's Domination of the World's Movie Screens from the 1890s to the Present* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997), 23.
[6] Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 8.

the international distribution of American films resulted from a concerted effort to dominate foreign markets conducted through initiatives agreed upon by representatives of the U.S. government, trade organizations, and studio heads. The efficiency of this coordination resulted in a situation in which the exclusionary and anti-competitive practices that were so effective in creating U.S. dominance abroad—and which had organized studio output for foreign markets into a global export cartel—began to run afoul of the U.S. Justice Department as the studios eventually used the same model to push for total dominance of the home market.[7]

The studios were taken to court by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for monopolization tactics in 1921, 1928, and 1930. While these schisms reveal internal debates over the economic power that studios could exert within the cultural sphere in the United States, the studios were given free rein abroad and the global dominance of the major Hollywood studios continued to grow even during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration.[8] Politicians and moguls remained close despite the growth in the

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[7] Wheeler, *Hollywood: Politics and Society*, 21-22.

[8] While this dominance was actively contested in Europe through measures like quotas placed on American films, efforts to counter U.S. exploitation of domestic film markets were only partially effective. Quotas were often subject to negotiations in which the U.S. leveraged market demand for imports in ways that ultimately benefited U.S. trade interests. In noting that "quota arrangements simply did not work," Jens Ulff-Møller writes that "what defines the dominant position of the American film industry was not only the size of Hollywood's market share...but also its ability to reduce the market share of...competitors." *Hollywood's Film Wars with France: Film-trade Diplomacy and the Emergence of the French Film Quota Policy* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 168. The effects of sustained measures to reduce market share were more extensive in countries outside of Europe whose governments lacked official policy positions on foreign film imports. In both Argentina and China, small film industries became surprisingly robust in the face of competition with Hollywood, but U.S. film studios pushed their advantage through government channels that exploited the vagaries of market forces. A paradigmatic case of the powerful coordination between the U.S. government and Hollywood studios—which advanced both the foreign policy goals of the government and the hemispheric dominance of Hollywood film—was the period of U.S. boycotts on the Argentine film industry that contributed to the decline of Argentine film production beginning in 1939 under the "Good Neighbor Policy." As Tamara Falicov explains, while ostensibly a response to Argentina's neutrality in the years leading up to WWII, the policy ultimately succeeded in deepening Hollywood's hold on Spanish-language film market in Latin America. Illustrating the long-term economic motives behind these policy decisions, Falicov quotes Tino Balio: "to offset conditions in the war-torn European countries, Hollywood turned to Latin America. There, although the industry had a

administration's regulatory powers and the National Recovery Administration's stipulations that studios must allow unionization and abide by fair trade practices, which many conservative studio heads vociferously opposed.

Despite what was at times a stormy relationship, connections between the Roosevelt Administration and the film industry continued into the 1930s and films of the period even expressed this intimacy visually. As Giuliana Muscio points out in *Hollywood's New Deal*, the mutual good feelings are revealed in the Busby Berkeley choreographed dance number "Shanghai Lil" in Warner Brothers' 1933 *Footlight Parade*, in a scene in which the dancers assemble to form a near-perfect imitation of the National Recovery Administration logo (Figure I.2).[9]

Figure I.2 The National Recovery Administration Given the Film Treatment in *Footlight Parade* and Ruby Keeler, acting in yellowface, dancing with James Cagney. NRA logo (Center) with scenes from *Footlight Parade*. [10]

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near-monopoly, the market had never been fully exploited." See, "Hollywood's Rogue Neighbor: The Argentine Film Industry During the Good Neighbor Policy, 1939-1945," *The Americas* 63, no. 2 (October 2006), 245-260. For a comprehensive study of the market share of U.S. films in foreign markets from the 1900s up to 1934, as well as a survey of instances in which U.S. market penetration was less effective that also includes details on foreign policy measures taken to contest U.S. dominance, see Kristen Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in* the World Film Market 1907-1934 (London: BFI Publishing, 1985), esp. chapter Four "Maintaining the Lead" and chapter Five "Surviving Talkies and the Depression, 1929-1934."

[9] Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 98.

[10] *Footlight Parade*, directed by Lloyd Bacon (1933; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

In this sequence, Hollywood's make-believe world creates an over-the-top and contemptible image of a Shanghai opium den that shows Hollywood mining the exotic allure of East Asia, implicitly portraying Shanghai as morally compromised and as a potential site of U.S. cultural dominance. The film features depictions of American navy sailors caught under the spell of libidinous Chinese women. The women are played by white American actresses in yellowface. Although thoroughly racist and bordering on the absurdly cartoonish, these sequences do not run against the putative moral aims that were later established under the Hays Code. The scene instead reiterates North's vision of the "ideals, culture, customs, and traditions" that would "undermine those of other countries." Watching the sequence creates a Kuleshov-effect chain of associations in which the viewer is drawn into the eroticized and exoticized milieu and then reassured that the diegetic world of the film lies safely within the moral universe of a nation-building project planned in accordance with the military and economic parameters set by the United States (see Figure I.2). Such scenes are loosely based on the real events, particularly the placement of U.S. troops in Shanghai following the 1932 Shanghai Incident—one of the initial steps towards the invasion of China's sovereign territory by Imperial Japan. Nonetheless, the scenes are especially unsettling as these cinematic portrayals of East Asia lack even a glimpse of the increasingly powerful Japanese Empire that had sent the Chinese populace into a terrifyingly vulnerable position. Instead, they depict China as a target of disparagement, a culture irredeemably weak and corrupt, and

thus vulnerable—ripe for exploitation by the U.S. or any other empire seeking dominance.[11]

Even without the persistent support of the U.S. government abroad, the 1920s culminated in massive growth for Hollywood studios—a situation exemplified by the birth of RKO Radio Pictures between 1929-1931—a massive entertainment empire that emerged through mergers between Pathé Exchange, a film production and distribution company, Radio-Keith-Orpheum media corporation, which owned theater chains across the United States and had stakes in radio and sound equipment through close affiliations with NBC and RCA Victor.[12] Early innovations in sound synchronization and enterprises in vertical integration required mass infusions of capital in the late 1920s, which made Hollywood film a cultural export that was ultimately a synthesis of the forces of U.S. finance capital. Colin Schindler writes that the late 1920s were a period of consolidation marked by "alliances with the Eastern investment banks."[13] For example, Warner Bros. became a major studio through a partnership with Goldman Sachs that resulted in economist and investor Waddill Catchings holding a seat on the board of the studio.[14]

Rather than weakening Hollywood's links with finance, the bankruptcies that followed the 1929 stock market crash tied Hollywood studios even closer to New York investment capital. The banks that had financed rapid studio growth in the 1920s wielded

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[11] Attesting to the global circulation of these objects of mass consumption—as well as to the allure that is still exerted by the exoticized image of Asia constructed by 1930s Hollywood—Paul Theroux describes finding an original and intact 78 RPM copy of "Shanghai Lil" performed by Ben Bernie and All the Lads in a boarding house in Cuzco, Peru in his 1979 travelogue *The Old Patagonian Express: By Train through the Americas*. Theroux dedicates the book to "my Shanghai Lil." *The Old Patagonian Express: By Train through the Americas* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 318.

[12] Richard Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan is Born* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 19; 30-32.

[13] Colin Shindler, *Hollywood in Crisis Cinema and American Society, 1929-1939* (London: Routledge, 1996), 5.

[14] Shindler, 5.

greater control as studios went into receivership. Fox Film Company, RKO, and Paramount all went into receivership by 1932, with bank officials entering into studio management. John Hertz of Lehman Bros. became the Chairman of Paramount's Finance Committee in 1931. Iwan Morgan describes the ways in which the economic crisis completed the integration of Hollywood within U.S. finance capital:

> Wall Street firms became increasingly involved in underwriting new stock issues for film company capital expansion, initially to fund movie theatre acquisition and latterly the costly adaptation to sound. In return, financial houses gained representation on the executive boards of companies in which they had made such heavy investments. Bankers promptly took control of those that went under in 1933, with the aim of reviewing profits through further cost-cutting and efficiency gains...studio management was transferred to salaried managers with expertise in the film business...Warner Bros and Columbia...remained family businesses but the founding brothers of each had in effect become New York based financial managers...and Hollywood-based production managers.[15]

Compounding this process were speculative practices that sent studios further into cycles of debt. When the economy faltered, many studios hoped to forestall catastrophe by reinvesting profits in new synchronized sound film ventures, launching the period of lavish Depression-era musicals. While they provided immediate pleasure for audiences in the United States, for foreign audiences, these films—among which Warner Bros.' *Footlight Parade* was a key example—often presented a perplexing mix of messages: beyond stereotypes that conveyed white supremacy and the objectification of women, these films seemed to promote ostentatious wealth while the country was already mired in a crisis generated by America's blind faith in capital. Viewing Joan Blondell's final song in *Gold Diggers of 1933*, Shanghai filmmaker Xia Yan not only saw the film as a

[15] Iwan W. Morgan, "Introduction," in *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s*, eds. Iwan W. Morgan and Philip John Davies (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 5.

"weapon" for American imperial ideologies, but was also dumbfounded by the blind pursuit of prosperity that continued in a time of national crisis.[16]

Hollywood's cultural and political muscle had been growing throughout the 1920s and the leaders of the major studios embraced a ruthless pro-capitalist ethos that pervaded the corporate culture of commercial film production in the United States. This ethos was clearly communicated to foreign audiences in film exports.[17] Hollywood's cultural and political muscle had been growing throughout the 1920s and the leaders of the major studios embraced a ruthless pro-capitalist ethos that pervaded the corporate culture of commercial film production in the United States. The "production-unit" approach to management was aimed at cutting costs but also changed the nature of Hollywood production to a model that was highly streamlined and in which producers' financial decisions often superseded the creative aims of directors, screenwriters, and performers.[18]

These same producers stand out as some of the most vociferous opponents of political reforms even as the economic crisis deepened in the early 1930s. Jack Warner, who became fondly remembered for creating a studio that offered socially oriented dramas, including *I Am A Fugitive on a Chain Gang*, ran the company in a way that was notorious for its exploitation of workers. In 1929, Louis B. Mayer—who had earlier

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[16] Xia Yan, "*Gewu Shengping* Woping," *Xia Yan Quanji* (Hanzhou: Zhejiang Wenyi Chubanshe, 2005), Vol. 6: 85.

[17] Producers and studio heads also gained an unprecedented amount of control over films with a reorganization that began after the 1929 Crash, during a transition towards a "production-unit" approach beginning in 1929. In this period producers began to take a leading role in determining the form and content of individual films. In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Janet Staiger details this shift in Hollywood's "mode of production" and she links the shift to changes in financing. Staiger writes that this period marked Hollywood's move towards a stage of "advanced capital," with the shift beginning in 1929 and ending around 1935. "The Hollywood Mode of Production, 1930-1960," in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 313-322. On the relationship between this transition and the economic circumstances of Great Depression, also see Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press. 1996), 74-76.

[18] Staiger, "The Hollywood Mode of Production, 1930-1960," 321-322.

rallied support for Calvin Coolidge—so strongly supported Herbert Hoover that he "staged a massive campaign rally at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles."[19] David Critchlow describes Mayer as an early example of a style of American public life that would increasingly merge entertainment and politics. Critchlow writes that the campaign rally "showed how glamour and politics could be combined in...[a] new age of celebrity and mass consumption."[20] Mayer "required MGM's studio workers to contribute to [Hoover's] campaign coffers" and "persuaded newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst to transfer support" to Hoover.[21] Mayer perhaps best exemplified the ideological orientation of most studio heads of the time and, as Mark Wheeler describes, he embodied a "mogul politics" of "hardness, shrewdness, autocracy, and coercion" that led him to forge close relationships with press barons and conservative politicians.[22] Taken as a whole, these figures formed a cultural elite devoted to promoting the interests of the wealthy even as the country was undergoing the worst nation-wide social crisis in its modern history.

(Not so) Silently Selling Empire: Globalized Capital on the Silver Screen and a Tide of Radical Disruptions

Gerald Horne and Michael Denning have written on the ways in which the growth of these powerful factions engendered a reaction among leftist social movements within the

[19] Donald Critchlow, *When Hollywood Was Right: How Movie Stars, Studio Moguls, and Big Business Remade American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14.
[20] Critchlow, 14.
[21] Mark Wheeler, "The Political History of Classical Hollywood: Moguls, Liberals and Radicals in the 1930s," in *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s*, eds. Iwan W. Morgan and Philip John Davies (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 31.
[22] Wheeler, 31-34.

U.S. that spurred leftist organizers to action[23] This reaction is most strikingly captured by Upton Sinclair's socialist political campaign, End Poverty In California (EPIC). Sinclair not only supported socialist principles, but had taken direct aim at the studio system and its irregular financial practices during a run for California's governorship.[24] Wheeler describes the fact that Sinclair's socialist platform aimed the energies of socialist political movements directly towards Hollywood moguls and included the "nationalization of the film industry and strong federal regulation to deter the studios' dubious forms of accounting." He writes that "on the 1934 campaign trail Sinclair made film industry mistreatment of its workers a key issue."[25] Denning writes that "The Popular Front" "emerged out of the crisis of 1929" but that "the political roots of the California Popular Front lay in Upton Sinclair's historic...1934 EPIC campaign for governor."[26] Denning comments that what he calls "the cultural front" extended into the industry itself: "the Hollywood Popular Front was also the product of the drive to unionize the film industry's crafts."[27]

The period after the 1929 stock market crash is thus underpinned by Hollywood studio elites' autocratic yearning for unlimited expansion of exploitative capital. Their direct tactics to implement this not only occurred in the make-believe world of pictures but in the exploitation of labor within their studios and these activities incurred serious political resistance in the United States. As Xia Yan's adamant dismissal of Depression-

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[23] See Gerald Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930-1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, & Trade Unionists*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001) and Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996).
[24] Sinclair also details the efforts of Hollywood studio heads, William Hearst and MPPDA chairman Will Hays acting in concert to destroy his political campaign in *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 164-168.
[25] Wheeler, "Political History of Classical Hollywood: Moguls, Liberals and Radicals in the 1930s," 34.
[26] Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century,* xviii.
[27] Denning, 19.

era musicals shows, the international response to the export of Hollywood capital was no less forceful. Nonetheless, a full picture of the political movements mobilized against Hollywood is less clear and requires imagining global connections in a world fragmented by the incursions of dual and related forces of colonialism and capital.

Much as Denning describes how an exceptionally intense cultural front emerged in Los Angeles as a meeting place of creativity and industry, my own study turns to Shanghai and Buenos Aires—two cities that were involved in intensive industrial production of local commercial cinema and that were global hubs for the exhibition of foreign films. Moreover, along with their status as major cultural centers for film production, Shanghai and Buenos Aires also had vibrant and volatile political movements in the first decades of the twentieth century. In these two cities, radical intellectuals, working-class intellectuals, and emerging filmmakers were active in creating alternative forms of cinematic modernism that mobilized local popular culture for global working-class political movements—incensed, inspired, and ignited by cinema.

In Shanghai and Buenos Aires, groups of cinematically oriented intellectuals arose linked by a common cause to bring about what Argentine author Roberto Arlt deemed the "revolutionary task of cinema."[28] Outside the context of a US political arena that was divided between factions supporting the rights of laborers and elites bent on an endless drive towards profit, the centralization of Hollywood film production within an advanced mode of capital had quite different effects. In cities in East Asia and South America where cinema held sway over the urban populaces as the most popular modern form of cultural engagement, Hollywood's cultural hegemony and economic exploitation

[28] Roberto Arlt, "El cine y estos pueblitos," *El país del río: Aguafuertes y Crónicas*, eds. Cristina Iglesia and Montserrat Borgatello (Paraná: Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos, 2016), 48-51.

sparked movements of radical intellectuals working towards undercutting Hollywood's power. These intellectuals envisioned cinema as a revolutionary form of mass culture.

The first tactic common to these movements was a repurposing of capitalist commodities. Through expropriations of commercial film form and content, radical intellectuals in Shanghai and Buenos Aires created new representations of commodities that actively distorted and denatured the commodity fetishism that fueled Hollywood's cinematic experience. The second tactic—shared by all four of the figures in this study—involved theorizing the ways that the film medium could lead to a transformation of the "masses." Cinema, as a collaboratively produced and collectively consumed cultural form, presented working-class intellectuals with entirely new grounds for imagining mass cultural experiences in ways that could transcend categories of collective political action like nation, state, class, or commune. Each of the figures in this study actively published in the popular press to spread the word of the revolutionary mass culture that they believed a radically disrupted film form could initiate. A third area within which the radical intellectuals of Shanghai and Buenos Aires sought to create a revolution in cinema was by altering the sensory and psychological states at the core of a mass audience's participation in cinema. To be sure, these efforts were unsteady, speculative, and uneven: during this period, even established studio heads in Shanghai and Buenos Aires lacked the capital to establish fully verticalized industrial film studios that could compete with those of Hollywood. However, these radical intellectuals experimented with alternative modes of film production, often as an extension of their activities in promoting the political agency of the working classes.[29] In the process, they aimed to

[29] For Mao Dun and Xia Yan these activities were part of their participation in the League of Left-wing Writers, in which they united with dozens of other leftist and communist writers to create an early

cultivate viewing and listening practices that would provide a horizon for politics through the products of mass consumption that made up local audiovisual cultures. Working in direct contrast to Hollywood's world of make-believe, these thinkers sought to invent filmic form and technique that would bring the moment of spectatorial engagement closer to a critical immediacy with social reality.

Although the story of Hollywood's rise as a powerful culture industry divided between Los Angeles production and New York bookkeeping is a familiar one—chronicled in studies of the political economy of the domestic film industry in the United States like Thomas Schatz' *The Genius of the System* and Tino Balio's *The American Film Industry*—movements of resistance to this peculiar synthesis of capital and culture in modernized urban centers outside of United States and Europe have been much less well documented. As a key commodity of empire, film reverberated throughout the cultural life of cities around the world as American studios dominated foreign entertainment markets.

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cultural front that was associated with the Chinese Communist Party. Although Alfonsina Storni's political activities were largely confined to writing, she became well-known in the 1920s as a spokesperson for the everyday life of urban women and as a critic of the effete lifestyles of the bourgeoisie. Near the end of her life, Storni was featured in a magazine published by Argentine socialist Manuel Ugarte and she was invited by the Uruguayan Ministry of Education to speak alongside Gabriela Mistral and Juana de Ibarbourou conference on women's writing in 1938. At the conference, alongside the two leading voices of women's rights in South America she and gave a clear statement of the class consciousness at the basis of her work as she spoke of her poetry in relation to the pressures of wage labor. See "Entre un par de maletas a medio abrir y la manecilla del reloj" in *Obras Tomo II: Narraciones, Periodismo, Ensayo, Teatro*, ed. Delfina Muschietti (Buenos Aires: Ed. Losada, 2002), 1075-1084. Roberto Arlt was active in the leftist Boedo group, producing theater performances for working class audiences with Teatro del Pueblo founder Leonidas Barletta and maintaining close ties with leftist social realist writer Elías Castelnuovo. Arlt also shared deep sympathies with Argentine anarchists, sentiments most famously expressed in a 1931 reportage piece written for *El Mundo*. In an *aguafuerte* dispatched from the scene of his public execution, Arlt lamented the death of Argentine-Italian anarchist Severino Di Giovanni. See Roberto Arlt, "He visto morir," in *Las aguafuertes porteñas de Roberto Arlt*: *Publicadas en El Mundo, 1928-1933*, ed. Daniel C. Scroggings (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1981), 194-195.

Viewed from the standpoint of spectators outside of the U.S., Hollywood films offered a vision of a global America that was, by turns, mesmerizing, seductive, overwhelming and invasive. The responses of intellectual figures who became spokespeople for the middle and working classes in their respective cities indicate that foreign viewers were especially sensitive to the ways that Hollywood commercial cinema exploited ideologies of race and gender to promote the ostensible naturalness of exceptionalism and expansionism that the United States sought as a condition of global politics. Through a cinematic dream-world crowded with fantasy scenes of global domination by a society whose idea of culture exalted white, anglophone, and masculine heteronormativity, Hollywood films neatly packaged all of this in seemingly innocent and entertaining stories featuring fashion, song and dance that could be rapidly distributed around the world. These Hollywood films often had the force of undermining national culture. However, as Roberto Arlt describes in the article examining the "revolutionary task of cinema," in "the little towns" of the Argentine interior, these fatally attractive qualities could also give cinema a revolutionary character. In transporting audiences, films ignited passions and left deep impressions on the consciousness of audiences that experienced places and people that they would never have a chance to encounter in their everyday lives.[30] Local intellectuals and activists thus seized upon cinema as a site of political provocation. The details of each case study show the deep desires of revolutionaries to realize cinema's power within cultural contexts in which film was everywhere. Working-class writers in Shanghai and Buenos Aires expressed an

[30] Arlt, "El cine y estos pueblitos," 48-9.

alternative vision for cinema in which film could figure as a form of direct mass experience that channeled the effects of globalized capital in politics and everyday life.

Writing the Revolution: Dispatches on Cinema from the Global Periphery

Among the writers in Shanghai and Buenos Aires disrupting the global flow of Hollywood capital, Alfonsina Storni was the most dedicated to scrutiny of the medium of film from a social and materialist standpoint. The first chapter, "The Machine, Docile as my Heart: The Affinities of Sentiment and Technology in the Film-Poems of Alfonsina Storni," traces a decades-long passion for film in the work of the Argentine poet that reveals a sophisticated understanding of cinema from within a constellation of filmic technologies connected to global commodity markets. Framed by her broader concerns for capturing human emotional life from within an interplay of self and machine, this chapter examines encounters with film through which Storni poetically renders the physical and psychic layers of the experience of modern life. Nonetheless, throughout her career as a writer, she returns to film with an intense curiosity about the strange qualities that the medium possesses to alter the self and sense of place, as well as with film's capacity to become an intermediary for conscious experience.

In an exchange of images and commodities that exhibit the deep connectedness of the economic and cultural lives of East Asia and South America, a striking illustration of a silk shawl called the "Mantón de Manila" appears on the cover of the December 8th, 1929 issue of *Revista Semanal* (See Figure I.3, below). The issue also contains Alfonsina Storni's first "Kodak" poem, a set of vignettes in verse for which Storni borrows the name of the U.S. film. Numerous other examples in newspapers, pictorials, and

magazines of the time attest to the fact that "Kodak" had already become a byword in Latin American periodicals in the 1920s to refer to multimedia photo collages and photo essays, as well as a form of written chronicle. For example, a photo collage titled "Kodak Teatral" was included in this same 1929 issue of *Revista Semanal*, only a few pages from Storni's poem.

Figure I.3 Cover Illustration of *La Nación*'s *Revista Semanal* December 8th, 1929

Storni's bold repurposing of the word as a title for her poem both serves as an announcement of the filmic qualities of her experimental verse as it simultaneously calls to mind the ways in which the capital of U.S. companies like Eastman Kodak have slipped into every aspect of social relations. To see the world in modernity would always be an action connected to the photograph. However, the photograph is only superficially an aesthetic form. Ultimately, it is a commodity form, with alienation, misrecognition and fetishism embedded within it. Storni's poem relays the feeling that to visually capture scenes of the city, the country, or even one's friends, family or lovers in the 1920s was to always reflexively return to the technologically reproduced image and the technological commodities that made this reproduction possible.

The cover image of the "Mantón de Manila," or the "Manila Shawl," is important primarily as it sets the scene of her writing within the commercial print marketplace in which readers encountered it. Storni's written work was published in daily and weekly magazines as part of an ephemeral gathering of newswriting, lifestyle commentary, fashion advice, and film reviews that competed with the image-rich advertisements of global commodities. Many of these advertisements—for Kalos healing creams, Dubarry soaps, Ford motorcars, or R.C.A. radios—also called out to readers through the attractions of exoticized stereotypes of faraway places. Storni was styled by publishers to compete for the attention of a reading audience enthralled with films and magazines that featured representations of the Far East. The editors of *La Nación* gave Storni the orientalist sobriquet "Tao Lao" for the "Bocetos Femeninos" ["Feminine Sketch"] advice columns for which she became well known throughout Argentina. The image also calls to mind an essential feature fashion, especially of exotic foreign fabrics that recur

throughout her writing, particularly as a way of connecting everyday life of mass publics with local and global markets of labor and commodities.

Just beneath the surface of Storni's writing is a wry critique of the conformity of mass consumer culture. With the cover image of the Manila Shawl, the material labor of the areas around Shanghai—agricultural regions of silk and cotton production—entered directly into the daily experience of people all over the world. A description of silk figures prominently in the Tao Lao piece "Crespeculares." Storni describes the silk within the scene of a department store (a setting that recurs throughout the writings of cinema-oriented writers in Shanghai and Buenos Aires as both prime public space in the modern city and a microcosm of global capital). As with all commodities, the value of the luxurious silk goods she describes is a product of the displacement of human labor. In the case of silk, this particular commodity is created by the labor of people of China and the exoticism it exudes is directly proportionate to the alienation of the commodity from its origin. In "Las crepusculares," Storni, writing as Tao Lao, gives her readers a view of the spectacle of the department store, describing "large stores with showy windows" [*grandes tiendas de vistosos espcapartes*]. Within, she describes the women as "smiling dolls" who are "[d]ressed in luxurious kimonos, regal nightwear, severe vests of tailleur, elegant silk slips, embroidered and frothy veils."[31] The piece thus describes spaces of luxury as dominated by the radically and unrecognizably foreign—in other words, places that are paradoxically constituted by total displacement. Ultimately, "Las crepusculares" dwells on the total consumption of humanity within the capitalist gaze, as wealthy

[31] Alfonsina Storni, "Las crepusculares," *Obras Tomo II: Narraciones, Periodismo, Ensayo, Teatro*, ed. Delfina Muschietti (Buenos Aires: Ed. Losada, 2002), 915-917.

shoppers become engrossed in viewing a department store fashion model on the runway in the department store.

Figure I.4 Marlene Dietrich in the Manila Shawl in *Shanghai Express*[32]

Josef von Sternberg's 1932 *Shanghai Express* was born out of the craze over East Asia that also drives the opium-den sequence in *Footlight Parade.* Much like the Hawaiian craze that raged in Hollywood from the beginning of the 1920s well into the 1930s (and the sometimes-overlapping Latin Lover and Latin Spitfire crazes that produced films like *Honolulu Lu*, which starred Lupe Vélez). These films exports of the Hollywood culture industries that dramatized ethnic and racial stereotypes reflected the circuits of the actual commodities of American industrial and military empire. These films also visualized the territorial desires that foregrounded exploitative practices of American industries with a global reach, as American companies continued to profit from maintaining territorial expansions in Latin America and East Asia that facilitated import-export networks in silk, cotton, sugar, bananas, and tobacco.[33] In Hollywood's

[32] *Shanghai Express*, directed by Joseph von Sternberg (1932; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2012), DVD.

[33] Understanding the cartel politics of U.S. film industries in this light—and the ideological effects of the global circulation of film commodities— requires seeing film as part of an interlocking network of commodities that generated corporate profit while extending the geopolitical influence of the United States. Recent transnational historical research on early twentieth century commodity networks show the

representations of global commodities in an estranged state, global audiences recognized not the trade in objects themselves but signs of empire that communicated a more effective and flexible kind of political and economic hegemony.

Much of the entertainment offered by *Shanghai Express* revolves on the attraction of the gaze (of both the audience in the cinema and the characters within the film), while the film's visual aesthetic also draws upon forms of commodity fetishism that drive mass consumption. Marlene Dietrich's persona as the cool and seductive "Shanghai Lily" indulges in a gaze upon a simultaneous objectification of women, consumption of colonized Shanghai and attraction to the seductiveness of commodities. Dietrich's wardrobe is a key attraction of the film, as posters for the film clearly expressed at the time of the film's release (see Figure I.5).

Figure I.5 *Shanghai Express* posters from the Film's U.S. (left) and German Release (right).

ways in which American imperialism was conducted through a systematic combination of diplomatic and corporate operations abroad. For example, Nan Enstad's *Cigarettes Inc.: An Intimate History of Corporate Imperialism* is an in-depth study that uncovers a confluence of ideologies of Jim Crow segregation and imperialist political tactics in the inner workings of transnational tobacco industry through corporate promotion and advertising, management structure, foreign policy influence, and manipulation of labor policies. In one instance that displays an effort to conceal ideologies of racial difference within the deliberately mystified signs of global corporate capital, Enstad describes tobacco barons whor held a conviction in "an inherent egalitarianism of the abstract economic exchange." She writes that this allowed corporate interests to capitalize on their product while ignoring "the significance of racial difference." *Cigarettes Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 258-259.

Shanghai Lily is draped in a garment that strikingly resembles the Manila Shawl featured on the cover of the *La Nación* supplement. Dietrich's appeal and character on screen is bound up with the global circuits of commodities displaced from their origin—commodities whose material afterlife so fascinated Storni. Like the film itself, these commodities proffer a visual consumption of an idea of Asia. In much the same way, Roberto Arlt examined film as a modern tantalus that works upon the viewer's psyche by creating an anxious cycle of unending desire.[34] Shanghai Lily's character is premised on such circuits of desire. From promotional materials, viewers knew that the film was set in a recreation of China located in Southern California. As such, the shawl is twice displaced and even more readily consumed because it is global and can be owned by anyone who wishes to wear the look of modern cosmopolitanism. The item is free-floating, unmoored and meant for global consumption, rather than being the product of local material economies. Seen purely from an entertainment standpoint, Hollywood aesthetics thus appear to free commodities from a material existence as the product of the exploitation of labor and the manipulation of market prices and social inequities.

The observations of writers in Shanghai and Buenos Aires—and the new ways they conceived of rethinking social reality through the cinema—show that international audiences perceived an active construction of a world in Hollywood films, whose totality was Hollywood itself. The investment of capital into these films was thus a tantalizing spectacle, but it ultimately created a circuit of feedback that infinitely returned to the American imagination and spurred a drive towards mass consumption in its purest and

[34] Arlt, "El cine y estos pueblitos," 51.

most standardized form. *Shanghai Express* is a prime, even paradigmatic, example of this phenomenon that exhibits the vast networks of labor and commodities that underlie Hollywood film products, which gave U.S. audiences simple escapist pleasures but were openly recognizable as more sinister when these films were exported abroad. *Shanghai Express* exemplifies a circulation of "Shanghai" and China, as commodities constructed by Hollywood. Shanghai Lily presents and embodies this rootlessness: she is an anxious embodiment—a commodity herself as a prostitute, a body presumably for sale—both within the narrative and as a star. The highest grossing film of 1932 and produced by Adolph Zukor—who had owned major financial stakes in Paramount until the Depression and had built the company into a verticalized empire— *Shanghai Express* is planted firmly within the producer-unit system.[35] However, the film marked a production in which the director had risen beyond the producer's vision and the film attests to von Sternberg's lasting fascination with Asia out of which would later emerge films like *The Shanghai Gesture*, *Macao*, and a co-production with Tokyo's Toho studios—*Ana-ta-han*—a film that he worked on independently of his Hollywood studio contracts. *Shanghai Express* thus bears the double stamp of von Sternberg's personal obsessions and the institutional histories that fused the economic and political interests of Hollywood studios with the aims of the U.S. government.

Responses to the worldwide premiere of *Shanghai Express* took the form of both passionate written critiques and street protests. In Shanghai, the protests following the film's release brought energy to a movement of young artists and dramatists that propelled them into commercial film production, where their clandestine experiments in

[35] Bernard Dick, *Engulfed: The Death of Paramount Pictures and the Birth of Corporate Hollywood* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 13-19.

creating a leftist sound film form eventually created the first inklings of what would become the foundation film production in communist China.[36] In a 1932 commentary on the film, Lu Xun viewed the racism of *Shanghai Express* alongside *The Thief of Baghdad*, the 1924 film starring Douglas Fairbanks that presented crude stereotypes of Chinese characters as unscrupulous villains. Lu Xun wrote that *Shanghai Express* was made "to scratch the entertainment itch of white people, but they've grown tired of watching African cannibals and films of wild beasts so now they want to put our yellow faces and flat noses on the silver screen."[37] Although disturbed by the fact that *Shanghai Express* made audiences believe in its representation of China, Lu Xun nevertheless urged young intellectuals in China not to play into the hand of Hollywood. Rather than fighting the orientalist stereotypes from which the film profited, as the sage voice of an older generation of revolutionary intellectuals, Lu Xun encouraged young people to look inward and fight the actual inequities within Republican China's social order. As it turned out, young filmmakers like Xia Yan would do both. Leftist artists, writers, composers, and musicians organized a cinema group that eventually entered the world of Shanghai film production and used their critiques of Hollywood film to found a new politically oriented cinema practice.

The global reception of—and resistance to—*Shanghai Express* displays the spectral economy of the commodity signs circulated by cinema. In particular, the film's representations of Chinese society intersect with racialized conceptions of the people of

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[36] Xia Yan records the fact that a crowd of thousands gathered around the Paramount-owned Da Guang Theater (also known as the Guanglu Grand theater—at the intersection of Huqiu Road and South Suzhou Road) shouting "Down with Imperialism," while British police officers assigned to patrol the foreign concessions of Shanghai arrested leaders of the protest. "Lanxun Jiumeng Lu," *Xia Yan Quanji* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Wenyi Chubanshe, 2005), Vol 15: 88.

[37] Lu Xun, "Lici Cunzhao (Er)," in *Lu Xun Quanji* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1981), Vol. 6: 622.

China as retrograde, backwards and corrupt. The film thereby draws viewers to consume the sights and sounds of an imagined China—built by the Hollywood entertainment empire as object ready for domination and mass consumption. Outrageously, the film does so at a time when the entire world was watching Shanghai. The Japanese Empire had just invaded the Chinese mainland and attacked the city. This was an empire that was in many ways modeled on—and seeking to perfect—European and American models of cultural, industrial and military domination.[38] This new form of imperialism attracted close attention in Argentina, a country that had been vulnerable to foreign economic and cultural imperialism devised by American and European powers whose hold on colonial territorial possessions was already slipping by the second decade of the twentieth century.

The reactions to *Shanghai Express* were so visceral not only because of the trite stereotypes that it conveyed of the Chinese people, but also because the line of its plot and the technological attractions of its visual effects emblematized a problem shared by societies across the world that contended with colonial powers: the intimate association between the expansion of railroads and the extension of foreign imperialism.[39] For most Argentines, the visible reach of twentieth-century Euro-American imperialism took the form of the country's privatized railroads, which the Argentine government was forced to build for British trade interests. Likewise, railroads evince anti-imperialist sentiments in the writings of both Storni and Arlt. Information on the ongoing power struggle in China

[38] See, for example, Hiromi Mizuno's discussion of Hajime Tanabe's theories that Japan's imperial destiny represented a synthesis of Eastern and Western thought in *Science for the Empire: Scientific Nationalism in Modern Japan* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 112-114.

[39] Among the many books on the relationship between railroads and empire, Manu Karuka's recent *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019) stands out as a study that captures the ways that the expansion of railroads presented both the domestic ideologies of settler colonialism and an assertion of global imperial hegemony.

and the fate of the Chinese people was sparse, mainly coming from sources rerouted through the press based in Europe and the United States. What Arlt could not glean from these news sources—he worked in a newspaper office, which granted him access to news at a level beyond that of the general public—he made up. In *Los lanzallamas*, in one of several asides referring to the violence of war in China, Arlt adds an anonymous footnote describing details of revolutionaries involved in an ongoing war in China. The protagonist, Erdosain says "all of the coasts of the world are occupied by fierce men with the help of cannons and machine guns they install factories and burn alive the poor indigenous peoples that resist their larceny."[40]

> Commentator's Note: Erdosain had reason to stand by these monstrosities. In the hours in which this edition of this book was finished, the French papers carried notices from China: Si-Wi-Sen, writer, communist, secretary of the *Shanghai Times* was detained by the English...and delivered over to the government in Nanking, who burned him alive in the company of his comrades. He was the author of the Life of Dostoyevsky. Fen Keng, writer detained by the English in the international concession. Handed over by these to the Guomindang. Executed by firing squad on the night of February 17th. Author of a novel titled Resurrection. He converted to communism and from the 30th of May participate in a massacre of students launched by English soldiers. You-Shih. Writer. Detained by the English, delivered to the Guomindang, executed on the night of February 17th.[41]

Curiously, these "commentator's notes" were added by Arlt in 1932, after the release of *Shanghai Express*—a film Arlt later writes about. In this footnote purporting to contain news from faraway China, Arlt has conjured up a fictional "commentator." Although Arlt situates the note outside of the narrative world of his novel, the reader finds in it a confluence of the themes of his two major novels, particularly as it describes the

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[40] Roberto Arlt, *Los siete locos; Los lanzallamas*, ed. Mario Goloboff (Paris: Université Paris X ALLCA XX, 2000), 492.
[41] Arlt, 492.

imagined actors of underground communist politics in China in terms of a meeting of the revolutionary and the creative.[42]

Although Arlt invents these incidents—and despite the fact that the book was written in 1931 (long before events like the Long March were publicized around the world) —he displays a grasp of basic goals and political orientations of the factions involved, while von Sternberg's film fundamentally misconstrues these circumstances. In the film, the revolutionaries are depicted simplistically as evil opportunists taking advantage of the chaos of an inherently barbaric society. Although the European presence as innocent interlopers in the context of a civil conflict is patently absurd, each is cast as an innocent interloper in *Shanghai Express*. The cluelessness of characters like the missionary Mr. Carmichael (Lawrence Grant) or the boarding house owner Mrs. Haggerty (Louise Closser Hale) notwithstanding, the European expatriates are primarily portrayed as men and women on missions with noble aims who embody humane values

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[42] "Fen Keng" and "You-Shih" may be references to actual figures Feng Keng (1907-1931) and Rou Shi, also known as Zhao Pingfu (1902-1931). Arlt's note either confuses the details and dates of their detainment and execution or contains misinformation that was relayed through newspaper reports in Argentina in 1931 but is now no longer available. The mention of British collaboration with the Guomindang indicates that a likely source of Arlt's information was a series of articles that Lu Xun wrote in 1931 and that appeared in Mike Gold's magazine the *New Masses*. These articles were translated and adapted for the magazine by Agnes Smedley and Mao Dun, including one article, "Thru Darkness in China" (derived from Lu Xun's text《黑暗中国文艺界之现状》), which states that the suppression tactics of the Guomindang were employing "a perfect copy of Japanese methods" and describes "a combined charge of British and Kuomintang police" that shut down left-wing magazine publishers. See "Thru Darkness in China." *New Masses*, February 1931, 10-11. Smedley was an American foreign correspondent and author of the 1929 book *Daughter of the Earth*. She lived in China throughout the early 1930s and maintained close ties with members of the communist party. Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor & Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* details the place of Mike Gold's *New Masses* in leftist cultural and literary circles after the Stock Market Crash of 1929. Within this study, Rabinowitz's book also contains an extended analysis of Agnes Smedley's thought and activism within leftist cultural life of the period. *Labor & Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 24-62. In "Long-Distance Realism: Agnes Smedley and the Transpacific Cultural Front," Richard Jean So traces Agnes Smedley's activities in establishing connections between leftists in China and the United States as the foundation of a circuit of political action existing outside of Soviet internationalism. "Long-Distance Realism: Agnes Smedley and the Transpacific Cultural Front" in *Transpacific Community: America, China and the Rise and Fall of a Cultural Network* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 1-40.

in the inhumane orient. Carmichael's dismay over the human and animal obstacles that hinder the progress of the train at the beginning of the journey are thus met with a matter-of-fact statement of the preternatural depravity of China by Henry Chang (Warner Oland): "You are in China now…where time and life have no value." Of course, this version of China as moral abyss is constructed entirely by Hollywood and, as such, the phrase is spoken by the ostensible native informant Henry Chang. Chang is played in yellowface by Warner Oland and he is later revealed to be the opportunist leader of the rebels, deepening the association between immorality and a racialized construct of China.[43] The note shows Arlt's dissatisfaction with Hollywood's version of the Chinese civil war. The passage captures his prescient understanding that Chinese revolutionaries were struggling to establish a communist state in the face of the alliance of international cadres of imperialist powers.

In a 1932 piece, Arlt describes von Sternberg's film, as well as the way in which the leading proletariat voice in Bueno Aires poetry circles, Nicolás Olivari, had exhorted him to see the film. Writing about *Shanghai Express*, Arlt conjures up the tantalizing effect of Hollywood commodities that first produce and then disappoint passions in spectators. Arlt makes a critique of the film while demonstrating film's potential for recreating the world of the everyday, at any place in the world. Observing the wealthy

[43] By the time of the release of *Shanghai Express* in February 1932, Oland had become established as one of Hollywood's main performers cast in yellowface roles. He had played the eponymous detective in three films in Fox Film Corporation's Charlie Chan series and, based on his success in the role, would go on to make thirteen more Charlie Chan films before his death in 1938. Jachinson Chan writes that "The practice of yellow face in the depiction of Charlie Chan is first and foremost symptomatic of the capitalist-driven demands of marketable commodities. Warner Oland, Sidney Toler, and Roland Winters had more name recognition than most Asian actors in the 1920s and 1930s. Underlying this logic is that Asian actors are inferior to their White counterparts and the symbolic colonization of having White actors depict Asians is quite clear: the accepted practice of yellow face sustains the racial hierarchy embedded in American culture." Qtd. from footnote commentary in Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 70.

citizens of imperial powers who ride the train from Beijing to Shanghai, Arlt writes that the film made him "lament that he was not rich and could not travel the Orient."[44] He follows this observation by writing of an encounter with a train on a narrow-gauge railway in his travels in Argentina's interior. The cinematic imagination through which he reinvents the train produces the fractured moniker "The Shanghai Express of Corrientes" (Arlt's article is titled "*El Expreso de Shanghai* correntino"). The piece suggests that perhaps the only way of encountering the modern world is through the commodity signs of film.[45]

Roberto Arlt's reflection on cinema and the infinitely displaced desires planted by films in the consciousness of modern audiences is one of a series of short articles he wrote as dispatches from the small towns and cities along the Paraná River near the Argentina-Paraguay border for the newspaper *El Mundo* in 1932. As Arlt wanders the towns, cinema is a constant companion helping him come to terms with what he sees. Throughout his trip, despite repeating the fact that he is only a short boat ride from the relatively cosmopolitan interior city of Rosario, Arlt reiterates (often with a flair for

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[44] "*El Expreso de Shanghai* correntino" in *El país del río: Aguafuertes y Crónicas*, eds. Cristina Iglesia and Montserrat Borgatello (Paraná: Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos, 2016), 80.

[45] The psychic and physical links between train travel and early forms of film spectatorship are noted by Wolfgang Schivelbusch in *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2014), 42. Schivelbusch's insights were later elaborated by Mary Ann Doane who points out that train travel foregrounds the experience of cinema in that a traveler, once physically connected to place, became a new type of disembodied spectator: "The train...and the cinema...contribute to the detachment or dissociation of a subject from the space of perception what might be termed a despatialization of subjectivity effected by modern technology...the train becomes a figure of fascination not only for the cinematic but for the philosophical and scientific imaginations. The classical cinema, through a regularization of vision and the subject's relation to the screen, reasserts and institutionalizes the despatialization of subjectivity." See "'When the direction of the force acting on the body is changed': The Moving Image," in Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 190. The historical relationships between trains and film as key technologies at the core of the experience of modernity has been most comprehensively traced by Lynn Kirby in *Parallel Tracks*, who notes, for example, that railroad tycoon Leland Stanford commissioned Eadweard Muybridge's 1872 experiments in motion photography, which eventually inspired Thomas Edison's kinetograph. *Parallel Tracks*: *The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 21.

exaggeration) that this outlandish, exotic terrain is peopled by Argentines that he shares very little with in common as a *porteño* urbanite. As with the piece on "Cinema in These Little Towns," many of his reflections are conducted through the movies he has seen. In "Resistencia, City of Film," for example, he says that he can only describe the city through film:

> It is necessary to speak through comparisons, because here we will go from the known to the unknown. Do you all remember the cities in American films: here there is a ranch, and three steps beyond that a bar, and, in front, a large store, and rising up into the heights, a great building? Such is Resistencia.[46]

Just as cinema spreads the signs of empire, cinema—and the visual cultures that spring up within its global domain—creates the conditions for a new language of sound and image to the world. Nevertheless, this is a language of infinite regress, in which only comparisons exist, and which is thus based on an ever-multiplying chain of referents. These moments of cinematic communication in Arlt resonate with André Bazin's theories in *What is Cinema?* in which filmic arts create a condition in which "the logical distinction between what is imaginary and...real tends to disappear" while, on another level, cinema "is also a language."[47] Likewise, for Arlt, cinema alters the world and consciousness while opening up the viewer to a language whose signs exceed the written or spoken in their closeness to the viewer's emotional world.

Throughout Arlt's writings, he is attracted to moments in which representations exceed reality. The second chapter, "Roberto Arlt: Hybrid Modernism and the Cinematic Vernacular," closely examines the fiction of Roberto Arlt, taking these reflections on the

[46] Robero Arlt, "Resistencia, ciudad del cine," *El país del río: Aguafuertes y Crónicas*, eds. Cristina Iglesia, and Montserrat Borgatello (Paraná: Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos, 2016), 67.
[47] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" in *What is Cine*ma? Berkeley: UC Press, 1974), 15-17.

paradoxes that film posed for modern culture as a point of departure. My analysis locates moments in which Arlt experimented with cinema to explore the possibilities and limits of audiovisual language for transforming time and consciousness. In these written works, Arlt tests the limits of the political volatility of the cinematic experience. He writes about cinema and writes in a cinematic style to travel the passage from the known to the unknown. Where he succeeds, and even sometimes even where these experiments fail, the reader arrives at new horizons for mass politics by entering into a consciousness of time and place that cinema invites. In these cinematic interventions into literary prose, Arlt breaks down contradictions of class and history and approaches an expansive anatomy of the concept of the masses.

From Argentine responses to Hollywood's evocation of China, I move to Shanghai itself. The third chapter, "The Proletariat's Cookbook: Art and Technology as Worker's Praxis in Mao Dun's Writings on Mass Culture and Film," examines the works on cinema and mass culture by Mao Dun, whose concerns over revolution and mass culture closely intertwine with the writings of Arlt. Much scholarship has analyzed Mao Dun's fiction, especially the novel *Midnight*. Just as my interest in Roberto Arlt considers the fact that he was writing for a working-class audience from the perspective of a working journalist, I take a different tack from most previous Anglophone scholarship on Mao Dun by reconstructing Mao Dun's theories of literature, culture, and film through his journalistic pieces. In particular, I focus on writings by Mao Dun published in the late 1920s and early 1930s and frame my study of the author with insights drawn from his work in the popular press during a period in which he lived in Shanghai, was working as a newspaper columnist and editor, and had yet to become one of China's most revered

fiction writers. This chapter proposes that besides the contributions to Chinese literature for which he has been recognized abroad, Mao Dun's major breakthrough came in non-fiction writing in which he pioneered a mode of cultural analysis for the mass audiences of Shanghai newspapers. Moreover, the chapter reveals that after initial forays into theorizing mass culture, he saw cinema as crucial to the future of proletariat literary and artistic culture.

In a series of articles written for major Shanghai newspapers, Mao Dun theorized a proletarianized national culture for China's future that relies on transformations in the concept of the masses, as well as on the institution of a massified culture for the working class based on integrating literature and technology in ways that would radically change the arts. Mao Dun's notion of the masses involves an understanding of proletariat consciousness in terms of what he called "The Big I"—a theory of consciousness and a notion of collective creativity that Mao Dun envisioned would supersede both individual and state in an organically emerging worker's state. On the basis of culture, this collective consciousness would inaugurate a new form of history to break Chinese society free from the endless cycles of class struggle and elite political power that make concepts of revolutionary historical change untenable. In the article "In Praise of Machines," Mao Dun also envisions a fusion of vernacular forms of writing with emerging industrial technologies. At these moments, Mao Dun moves towards an embrace of cinema as a cultural form while simultaneously advocating careful scrutiny of the "technique" of film. Mao Dun described filmic technique in newspaper film commentaries that featured a close attention to the cinematic construction of plot and character and these newspaper pieces also contained incisive interpretations of the political content of popular

entertainment films. Finally, in reviewing films from Europe and United States, Mao Dun warned of Hollywood's "anaesthetic," which he—much like Arlt—saw as a globalized form of cultural domination in which film production relied on creating a heightened emotional state in the viewer in ways that disrupted the spectator's consciousness for social reality.[48]

The final chapter, "Bullets, Bodies, and Beauty: Leftist Sound Cinema and the Militant Modernism of Xia Yan," examines the filmmaking and film criticism of dramatist Xia Yan when he was the most influential young communist political leader working in the Shanghai film industry. Xia Yan's first forays into film—as part of an operation coordinated by the Chinese Communist Party—occurred during the introduction of synchronized sound technologies in the local film industry. Beginning around the year 1930 in Shanghai, Xia Yan's understandings of film and mass culture share much in common with the major themes that one encounters in the work of Alfonsina Storni. Moreover, as Storni has retrospectively been interpreted as a lead figure in an emerging popular feminist movement, Xia Yan has recently been studied as an early precursor to feminist political movements in mainland China.[49]

As a screenwriter, Xia Yan's best known is a film based on Mao Dun's novel *Spring Silkworms*. Working with director Cheng Bugao, Xia Yan conceived of the film as

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[48] As a modernist writer who was enthusiastic for the mass political horizon that film provided but who also sought to intervene in filmic techniques that reproduced imperialist regimes of globalized socioeconomic power, Mao Dun thus departs from Shanghai modernists more closely associated with European cultural circuits. As Zhang Zhen describes the latter: "For the modernists, the masses were a broad social spectrum embodied in the moviegoers. They defined the metropolitan audience (*dushi guanzhong*) as patients suffering from neurasthenia and modern malaise who sought remedy in the movies." *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 272.

[49] For a study of Xia Yan's cultural activities that coincides with my own observations, see Zheng Wang, "Fashioning Socialist Visual Culture: Xia Yan and the New Culture Heritage," in *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1964* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 170-198.

a hybrid of fiction and documentary and included footage showing the centuries-old processes of silk making. The film depicted the immediate effects of a market for silk threatened with collapse by globalized speculation in the silk trade upon villagers in Zhejiang province. The film depicts rural villages, but Shanghai looms just beyond the film's setting as a global center for international trade in goods originating in the surrounding provinces. Although the Manila Shawl takes its name from the Spanish Colonial trade routes for Chinese goods that passed through the Philippines, the silk shawl likely made its way to Latin America and elsewhere directly from Shanghai.

Shanghai's emblematic place as a global center for commodities evoking glamour is the material that Xia Yan sought to capture in writing the screenplay for the film *Cosmetics Market*. The disappearance of the human origins of commodities and markets under capitalism recurs throughout Xia Yan's creative and critical work. The title reflects this process, as a market that sells beauty all value becomes mystified within the aesthetic. Goods seem to circulate as a result of abstract forces of capitalism rather than as a function of labor. Likewise, the labor of the female protagonist (played by megastar Hu Die) is equated with beauty and thereby becomes a commodity that is freely exchanged beyond her control. The film thus presents an object lesson that brings to life the complex economies of the twentieth century that Xia Yan believed leftist artists must contest—in particular, the aestheticization of the value of labor in Hollywood film commodities, which form a broader "cosmetics market" the film aims to critique. *Cosmetics Market*, set within a version of one of Shanghai's large department stores, converted the reified notion of a market back into a tangible, visible, audible place. The film's political critique is largely advanced through synchronized sound. Sound-on-film

recordings were emerging as a new technology in local cinema production in Shanghai at the time and the sonic composition embedded in the film thus presents a source of attraction to audiences—both a politically charged draw for spectators and a spectacular filmic feature that the financially-struggling Mingxing studio viewed as a sound investment.

The film's experiments in sound reveal the ways in which Xia Yan was actively collaborating with other members of the League of Left-Wing Writers to find a sound film form that could subvert Hollywood's use of sound film to drive further accumulation of capital. The film directly samples from three Hollywood film soundtracks in order to throw the unethical exploitation of women and labor in those films into sharp relief. The result of a collaboration between Xia Yan and the sound technicians, the film's sound effects anticipated China's own sound-on-film technology invented the following year. These collaborations led to the development of a new sound film aesthetic in Shanghai commercial film production from which would emerge the 1935 film *Children of Troubled Times*. This film, a collaborative effort of China's most politically engaged artists working in film and music in the 1930s, produced, in its final sequence, the source for the national anthem of the People's Republic of China. This collaborative effect realized Xia Yan's theories of film and employed his advances in narrative film technique. While *Children of Troubled Times* was produced in a time of great concern over national sovereignty following Japan's invasion of Chinese territory, *Cosmetics Market* glimpses an earlier moment of radical politics in Shanghai marked by international solidarity with the exploited and colonized around the world. The sound sequences allude to scenes in U.S. films depicting American hegemony in Latin

America—the soundtrack of the film reroutes the audience's experiences of the film's department store mise-en-scène through film music drawn from earlier Hollywood films with plots that enthusiastically embraced the effects of U.S. territorial expansion and colonialist policies in Hawaii and Cuba. The complex points of audiovisual reference set up in such scenes show that Shanghai's young communist filmmakers were highly aware of Hollywood's role in culturally undermining global political movements that sought to value the labor of workers and that fought for gender equity.

Cosmetics Market borrows from Hollywood films that confuse and conflate distinctions of race, nation, and ethnicity. For example, adapting a piece of Hollywood film music inspired by the craze over Hawaiian culture, the Chinese film reflects back upon a string of productions in which Lupe Veléz and Dolores del Rio play Hawaiian or Polynesian characters. In much the same way as the scenes of *Shanghai Express* that led to Lu Xun's description of the Shanghai audience's disgust with yellowface—namely, his explicit statement that the scenes revealed to Chinese audiences an ideological premise that all people who are not white are equally without value and thus to be used as raw materials for American pleasure—these anomalies exhibited an American culture corrupted by the limitless and inhumane abstractions of capital to audiences outside of the U.S. *Cosmetics Market*'s invocation of Hollywood film music shows that popular films depicting an exoticized Asia brought home to Shanghai audiences the fact that Hollywood's cultural hegemony had the ultimate goal of leveling all geographic and ethnic differences. Domination by a globalized American culture did not mean assimilation as much as a drive for complete exchangeability that would lead to limitless

profit.[50] This was precisely the effect that Arlt had also seized upon this in his writing on *Shanghai Express*. Projected on the big screen to audiences in Shanghai and Buenos Aires, the ciphers of American capital read—and were heard—much differently than they did within the United States.

Each of these case studies pays close attention to the specific shape and formation of cultural fronts launched in response to the cultural invasions of Hollywood cinema. However, each is also a window on radical intellectuals in the urban cultures of Shanghai and Buenos Aires that shows them to be closely aligned with political activists both in the United States and worldwide. Internationally, these cultural fronts were joined in a common fight against the influence of a world of Hollywood make believe that drew attention from deteriorating social relations of global societies hurtling towards total immersion in U.S. finance capital. The mass culture created by Hollywood unleashed upon the working people of the U.S. itself was a dehumanizing and divisive version of capitalism, a celebration of individualism that served the interests of investors and those

[50] Analyzing the reception of racialized depictions of East Asian characters in Hollywood film, Gina Marchetti argues that such orientalist portrayals justified the expansion of U.S. capitalism upon the message that the alien other of East Asia was "inferior…and in need of the guidance of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants." Likewise, she writes that rather than conflict or antagonism, these films show an enthusiasm for U.S. military and economic domination overcoming anxieties over an unassimilable "yellow peril." The films move towards a seamless world of make-believe in which white audiences can experience closure through a masquerade of otherness and create fantasies of journeys through dangerous internecine conflicts that can be viewed from afar and that U.S. audiences can see safely resolved. For Marchetti's discussions of orientalism in Hollywood film, see *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2-3. Of course, this move towards complete resolution and closure can never be completed and the greater problems of an inequitable and racist American society emerges in subtle details often in the background of the film's primary narrative. Namely, the profound gravitas of the acting performance of Anna May Wong, which gives her supporting role a sardonic dignity that resists racist typecasting (and that, at points, upstages the unctuous moodiness of Marlene Dietrich). In addition, the contributions of master cinematographer James Wong Howe—who provided uncredited footage for the films—complicate the film's racist fantasy of a white European savior bringing order to a chaotic and brutal China. For a description of Anna May Wong's public activities to promote a deeper understanding of China around the time of the production of *Shanghai Express* see Graham Hodges and Russell Gao, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 105-107.

in high positions of political power—the accumulation of vast wealth through the entertainment sector that often led directly to global political power, as the case of the rise of Joseph Kennedy's fortunes from leadership at RKO to a appointments in the Roosevelt Administration exemplifies. Viewed from within the domestic context of the U.S., these films expose rifts within a domestic social order that would lead towards crisis. Accounts of Hollywood cinema from media centers on the global periphery show that foreign audiences were closely attuned to Hollywood's move towards a mode of production based on advanced forms of globalized finance capital, as well as the political effects of these forms of U.S. cultural power.

Aside from a handful recent studies of the resistance activities of international cultural fronts, critiques of Hollywood's cultural hegemony that have made their way into scholarship in English are largely based on insights of thinkers already within the U.S. and European cultural sphere.[51] The ideas of thinkers of the Frankfurt School on the modern experience of cinema and the correspondences between fascism and mass culture have become deeply rooted in U.S. scholarship on cinema. However, these critical responses only give a partial view of the ways in which the extremes of U.S. film exports influenced the cinema cultures of cities around the world that were in the process of working out the relationships between modern audiovisual culture, labor markets, and collective political agency. To fully grasp the consequences of Hollywood's worldwide

[51] Two of the best recent studies in the transnational circulation of Chinese leftist thought are Richard Jean So's *Transpacific Community: America, China and the Rise and Fall of a Cultural Network* and Shuang Shen's study "Lu Xun, Cultural Internationalism, Leftist Periodicals and Literary Translation in the 1930s" in *China Abroad: Travels, Subjects, Spaces*, eds. Yee Lin Elaine Ho and Julia Kuehn (Hong Kong: HKU Press, 2009), 63-81. Other key collections that engage politicized texts and media with a broader geographic scope include *Audible Empire*, eds. Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); *The Global South Atlantic,* eds. Kerry Bystrom and Joseph R. Slaughter (New York: Fordham, 2018); and *Red Love Across the Pacific*, eds. Ruth Barraclough, Paula Rabinowitz, and Heather Bowen-Struyk (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

expansion, the reactions to it, and the cinema cultures founded in its wake, this study engages with the work of writers, critics, and artists who reached out to mass audiences in their own cities and nations in order to afford the public with a clearer picture of the deeper effects of the sounds and images that Hollywood was driving audiences to consume. While the United States was sending its "silent ambassador" to a largely unsuspecting world—more often than not backed by real, government-appointed ambassadors—these radical intellectuals presented all of the intimidating power of the United States as vast and its growing investment empire in their writings and films and refused to capitulate to the cultural force of the hegemon.

Among the commodities of luxury and leisure, but also a medium of profit and exchange, film gathers up all of the value exports in which finance capital invests to drive continuous global consumption. Entangled in a traffic in images and sounds actively constructed upon consumption of silk, Latin American tango, even China itself and much more, Hollywood films wrap the viewer in a fetishism that creates the sensation of an intimacy with another's body and voice. Hollywood sold this to enraptured mass audiences that mimicked these fashions; but these cultural temptations also sparked resistance. The writers and critics in this study constitute powerful voices in anti-imperialist film theory and practice, joining subversive intellectual contemporaries experimenting in subversive film form around the world, critics and artists such as Béla Balázs, Cube Bonifant, Esfir Shub, Luis Buñuel, José Oswald de Souza Andrade, and Germaine Dulac, as well as Americans working to expand the field of film culture, such as Maya Deren and screenwriter Tess Slesinger. This work thus fills in the gaps in the mapping of a global constellation of writers and thinkers who produced a

counternarrative of cinema pushing towards revolution against a commercial cinema merely in the business of selling dreams. In Shanghai and Buenos Aires, each a center of local production and innovation, these reconceptualizations of film were happening with great intensity. Alfonsina Storni, Xia Yan, Roberto Arlt, and Mao Dun wrote on cinema and mass culture with a density that embedded them deeply within mass political movements of their own countries. Although the story of the internationalist cultural front in which they played a part was fragmented, discontinuous, and disparate, they each offer powerful insights on the course that cinema took within cultures around the world in the twentieth century, and they each offer a vast body of wisdom to return to in reflecting on the future of cinema as a site of social transformation in a twenty-first century of continuous crises.

Chapter 1

The Machine, Docile as my Heart: Affinities of Sentiment and Technology in the Film-Poems of Alfonsina Storni

Buenos Aires,
Mastodon of steel ribs,
Widen your chest,
Arching,
And open, in waves,
Long and piercing,
Your bellow of savage sadness,
Of horrible happiness.

from "Arrival" [*Llegada*] (1927)

The sea comes in and defeats the walls
And on the screen it lets loose its surge
And advances towards your seat and the miracle
Of steel and moonlight touches your senses
[...]

The lunar machines in the canvas
Spin crystals of illusion so living
That you leap up and submerge yourself:

The sea recedes as the celluloid pulls it along
And in your fingers is left, stunning,
A mystical flower, technical and cold

from "Sea of the Screen" [*Mar de Pantalla*] (1938)[52]

[52] Alfonsina Storni, *Obras Tomo I: Poesía*, ed. Delfina Muschietti (Buenos Aires: Ed. Losada, 1999), 421; 536. "Llegada"—a poem about recently arrived immigrants in Buenos Aires—are unpublished poems that were likely composed for publication in the newspaper *La Nación*, for which Storni had published verse regularly in 1927. "Mar de Pantalla" was published in Storni's last collection of poems, *Mascarilla y Trebol* and in the collection was followed by the poem "Dibujos Animados" [Cartoons]. Translations of Storni's poetry from the Spanish are my own from Alfonsina Storni's collected works in *Obras I* and *II*. See Alfonsina Storni, *Obras Tomo I: Poesía*, ed. Delfina Muschietti (Buenos Aires: Ed. Losada, 1999) and Alfonsina Storni, *Obras Tomo II: Narraciones, Periodismo, Ensayo, Teatro*, ed. Delfina Muschietti (Buenos Aires: Ed. Losada, 2002). Translations are my own.

Throughout her writing career, Swiss-born Argentine writer Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938) fixated on the technological environment that surrounded her in urban Buenos Aires. A working writer variously portrayed by critics, and fans, as a member of the South American literary avant-garde, an early agitator for feminism and a literary hack composing sentimental verse for the commercial press, she does not fit easily into any of these retrospective categories.[53] Experiments in deploying the sounds, images and sensations evoked by modern technology within verse can be found throughout Storni's poetry and such lines find her lost in a contemplation of machines. In these moments, Storni often fluctuates between expressing the power of technology to attract human attention and taking up the forms of technology poetically as a correlative for emotion. Storni is not primarily interested in the ways in which people interact with machines in the built environment, but rather in how technology becomes indivisible from the human and "invites" us, or calls on us to "leap up" and "submerge" ourselves. She is curious about objects that inhere in our emotional life and channel, alter, amplify, and reroute human physical and mental experiences. Storni understood poetry less as an intellectual or creative practice than as being in a highly sophisticated and complex public role that aligned with her other activities as a writer in mass circulation publications. She compared poetry with receiving and broadcasting mass messages and the right poetic evocation of sentiment could bring clarity, empathy and connection: a poetic verse could

[53] Jaime Martínez Tolentino writes of the posthumous critical judgments of Storni's work: "every historical epoch from her death onwards has created a new version of Storni according to the tastes and preferences of that epoch, just as the intensity with which every epoch considers the theme of women's rights and the position that every epoch feels women must occupy in society. Because of this, a study of the modern literary critiques of Alfonisina Storni can shed light on how modern literary criticism considers all of hispanoamerican women's literature." See Jaime Martínez Tolentino, *La Critica Literaria Sobre Alfonsina Storni (1945-1980)* (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 1997), xii.

demystify the desires and suffering of an isolated and fragmented psyche. Storni's poems frequently contained renderings of technology in which a technological object materialized states of being. Over the course of her career, she increasingly turned to photography and motion pictures as the primary modern apparatuses capable of giving poetry new range to capture modern sensory experience.

The two long-form prose poems, "Kodak" (1929) and "Kodak pampeano" (1938), exemplify Storni's interest in creating poetry emulating still photography. In the long prose-poem experiment, "Film marplatense," published in *Critica* in 1936, Storni presents cinematic image and sound in a piece that is at once a chronicle (*crónica*) and an unfilmed shooting script. Throughout her written work, Storni demonstrates an intense sensitivity to the ways in which machine and industrial technologies have permeated literature, both within the psyche of the writer and in the material context of the scene of writing. These pieces exemplify Storni as poet and creator who spans graphic modes as she shuttles freely between roles as a writer and photographer, writer, and cinematographer.

Published almost a decade apart, "Kodak" appeared in the *La Nación* supplement *Revista Semanal* on December, 8th 1929 and "Kodak pampeano" in the magazine *Vida de Hoy* in February 1937.[54] Loosely structured, conversational and composed of scattered

[54]Besides writing for newspapers and magazines, writing poetry and drama, as well as raising a child as a single mother, Storni worked full-time jobs as a schoolteacher, at the counter of a pharmacy, and as an advertising editor for a Buenos Aires import firm. Considered in this context, her journalistic output was prolific, with Storni publishing numerous short pieces for *Fray Mocho*, *Caras y Caretas*, *La Nota*, *La Nación,* and other national publications. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s she penned a regular column featuring a combination of relationship advice and critique of gendered social norms under the pseudonym "Tao Lao" for the newspaper *La Nación*. In an article recognizing the ninetieth anniversary of Storni's first writing for a magazine column in the journal *Fray Mocho*—in which the author notes that Storni's journalistic achievements have not been sufficiently valued—Delfina Muschietti characterizes the powerful and idiosyncratic voice of Storni's journalistic writing: "[she] founded a way of doing journalism for women: a punning verbal form and implacable irony, ideological analysis and unmasking that which

and impressionistic reflections, rather than being experiments in verse, these film-poems bear a close relationship to a literary form ubiquitous in the popular press throughout Latin America since the nineteenth century: the *crónica*. This genre of writing had been popularized in the newspaper thought-pieces and travelogues of the *modernista* writers, primarily José Martí, but many other leading lights of nineteenth-century Latin American letters adopted the form, including Rubén Darío, Amado Nervo and Storni's friend and literary correspondent, Uruguayan philosopher José Enrique Rodó.[55]

Cameras, Antennas and Dictaphones: The *Crónica,* Technological Materiality and the Poetic Transmission of Body, Labor, Self and Emotion

In many ways, the *crónica*, as a genre, links the practices of poetry and photography. Its rise in popularity accords with the fact that it comes out of an era when intellectuals who were nationally known poets were publishing their intellectual work in periodicals backed by politically influential capitalists as the rise of mass literacy and a growing public readership followed movements for educational reform.[56] As the prefix *crono-*

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makes us laugh and think at the same time." ["*fundará una manera de hacer periodismo para la mujer: forma verbal punzante e implacable ironía, análisis ideológico agudo y desenmascaramiento que nos hacen reír y pensar al mismo tiempo*."]. See Delfina Muschietti, "El periodismo de Alfonsina," *Paquina/12*, April 7, 2002.

[55] For the most extensive analysis of the *crónica* genre to date, see Susan Rotker, *La invención de la crónica* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Letra Buena, 1992). For a comprehensive discussion of *modernista* writers and the *crónica* form, specifically in relation to flaneurism and changes in the relationship between literature and the modern city, technology and the multitude, see Dorde Cuvardic García, "El Flaneur y la Flanerie en las crónicas modernistas latinoamericanas: Julián del Casal, Amado Nervo, José Martí, Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, y Arturo Ambrogi," *Revista de Filología y Lingüística de la Universidad de Costa Rica* 36, no. 2 (2010). For compilation of current crónica writing, see *Antología de crónica latinoamericana actual*, ed. A. Darío Jaramillo (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2012).

[56] A brief outline of the national significance of the popular press in nineteenth century urban centers in Latin America is given in Ángel Rama *The Lettered City* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), see esp. chapter Four, "The Modernized City." For a highly nuanced discussion of the role of newspapers in creating shared national consciousness, contributing to the conflicting and uneven relationship between literature and journalism, as well as discussing the ways in which these problems converged in the writing of the *crónica*, see Julio Ramos, *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 79-116.

indicates, the literary form is founded in a mode of representation that has affinities with the filmic, especially as it presents an experience of reality tied to time, but by convention in Latin American letters not one that is primarily historical.[57] Chronological and replete with sensory effects, the *crónica* transmits the experience of writers as they pull a sequence of momentary reflections on a particular place from the stream of time. Moreover, encounters with the film as medium, and reflections on rapidly growing public appeal of both photographs and moving images, are a theme that writers frequently returned to in early *crónica*.[58]

In the 1920s and 1930s, *crónica* pieces were published alongside factual news, editorials and photo spreads. Periodicals with mass circulation were a patchwork of written and photographic spectacles. The *crónica* stands out as a peculiarly poetic and versatile form of creative documentary, a prose form that could, at turns, be loosely structured, rhapsodic, melodic, or reflective, and was also itself frequently accompanied by illustrations or photographs. From Storni's earliest journalistic work, her *crónica*

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[57] The tension between poetry—spanning verse and prose—and history is worth noting in considering the stakes of Storni's writing. Going as far back to Aristotle, who distinguishes between history as dealing in "particularities" and poetry as imaginary forms of expression that were "modes of imitation," and thus also mimetic. Aristotle also ascribes to poetry a form of futurity in the representation in "how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity." See Aristotle, *Poetics* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1997), 17.

[58] In *The Spanish American Crónica Modernista: Temporality and Material Culture*, Andrew Reynolds explains that a "homology" existed between the literary genre of the *crónica* and the medium of film and traces the ways in which "*crónica* were placed after a variety of classified advertisements and larger image-filled commercial promotions" resulting in texts in which the "consumption of the cinema carried over to the literary field." *The Spanish American Crónica Modernista*, *Temporality & Material Culture: Modernismo's Unstoppable Presses* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2012), 121-122. In a more peculiar example of the convergence between literature and photography in the genre, an 1895 piece by *cronista* Amado Nervo, "Fotografia espírita," explores the connection between nineteenth century spiritualism and the recently popularized craze for photography. The piece recounts conversations between spiritualists and photographers and contains an anecdote about "the son of Daguerre who believed that spirits were like microbes that must be trapped by the camera. Nervo writes of "a macabre artist that can focus their camera obscura on ultraterrestrial physiognomies" ["*artista macabro que fija en su cámara obscura fisonomías ultraterrestres*"]. See Amado Nervo, *Cuentos y crónicas*, ed. Manuel Durán (Mexico: UNAM, 1993), 81-82.

writings are marked by playful and deeply ironic turns of phrase, both indicating her mastery of the wit that characterized *crónicas* written by the *modernista*s, but also demonstrating Storni's capacity to shift rapidly between the subjective and objective; between the emotional intimacy and distance. In "Film marplatense," Storni explicitly narrates the poem from the point of view of the "*ojo de cronista*," or "eye of the chronicler"—described in the first stanza—constructing "the eye" at the center of the poem as a quasi-subjective apparatus through which sounds and images are captured and relayed. Functional, automated, distant yet also personal and highly sensitive, "the eye of the chronicler" is a kind of amalgam of poet and recording technology that recalls Dziga Vertov and Elizaveta Svilova's image of the lens-ensconced eyeball at the center of modern human activity in *Man with a Movie Camera*.

Storni's *crónica* writings are indebted to Nicaraguan writer Rubén Darío, who had lived in Buenos Aires from 1893 to 1898, was a founder and director of the Argentine literary magazine *Revista de América* and worked as a writer and editor for three Argentine publications, including *La Nación*, within which Storni had been a regular columnist since the early 1920s and in which she published the first Kodak poem.[59] During his stay in Argentina, Darío wrote several poems dedicated to Argentina and composed what has become known as the most enduring testimony to the country's intellectual energies written by a *modernista* author in the essay "Argentina as Latin American Avant-Garde." Since his sojourn in Argentina, Dario remained close to members of the Argentine avant-garde, and remained an influential figure for Argentine

[59] Rotker, *La invención de la crónica,* 22-23.

writers more generally. He was, moreover, also an acquaintance of Storni's close friend Horacio Quiroga, whom he met in Paris in 1900.[60]

By the 1920s, the *crónica* embodied a confluence of contemporary trends in the fields of literature and politics at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but was also inherently disruptive of the norms and conventions of elite literature. Andrew Reynolds notes that the *crónica* was a literary form that was relegated to the margins even during the period in which the *modernistas* were writing because of its "inability to follow institutionalized laws of the literary."[61] The *crónica* thus perfectly suited Storni's irrepressible streak of anti-establishment rebelliousness, but also allowed her to express these opinions in a way that would still attract a mass readership. To a large degree, the relationship between popular publications and women writers was symbiotic. As the boom in magazines that combined art, popular serial fiction and general lifestyle content like *La novela semenal* and *Plus Ultra* in the 1920s shows, middle-class female literacy in South American cities was exploding. Women hoping to become professional writers were guaranteed steady work (*Caras y caretas* published Storni's writing in five issues in 1920, for example), while magazines that published work by women were ensured an expanded circulation and greater advertising revenue,

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[60] Max Henríquez Ureña, *Breve historia del modernismo* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1978), 31. Josefina Delgado proposes that Dario's *Azul* was a key influence on Storni in the writing of her first book of poetry and during the time in which she was taking on part-time work as a journalist in several Buenos Aires publications. See Josefina Delgado, *Alfonsina Storni: Una biografía esencial* (Buenos Aires: Debolsillo, 2010), 64. Dario is also described as an influence upon Storni by Susan Bassnett McGuire in *Knives and Angels: Women Writers in Latin America* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books, 1990), 93.

[61] Reynolds, *The Spanish American Crónica Modernista, Temporality & Material Culture,* 77.

with the capacity to sell a greater range of goods across boundaries of gender conventions.[62]

The *crónica* form attracted Storni because of her background as a journalist, as well as for the readership it offered, but it also represented something more—a set of literary properties with a malleable and pliant form for experimentation. This made it a companion to her poetic work that could radicalize her intellectual vision by drawing out a poetic technique and vision that was immersed in sensory experiences that emulated modern audiovisual technology. The *crónica* fit Storni's perspective as a writer, in her verse and prose, grounded as they were in the time-scale of the everyday, but also relies on constant shuttling between objective and subjective, as well as a scaling between distance and immediacy. Repetition served her well. As Reynolds describes, the *crónica* "captures the ever-repeating present and taking hold of daily moments lies at the foundation of *crónica* textuality."[63]

The quotidian repetitions that constitute the *crónica* bring to the fore what was at stake for a writer immersed in the modern—in touch with a world whose axis has begun

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[62]Not unlike today's magazines on sale at the newsstand or supermarket counter, publications like *Caras y Caretas* were dense with advertisements. A New Year's issue in 1920, for example, contained—amidst advice columns, political cartoons, poetry and photos of world events—ads for wedding rings and watches, tea, a facial beauty cream called "Lettuce Cream" [*Crema Lechuga*], numerous automobile ads (including some directed towards female drivers) and an ad for cinema and recorded music entrepreneur Max Glücksmann's new catalog of records offering "new discs…for your family New Year's parties" ["*Nuevo discos…para sus fiestas familiares de fin de ano*"]. *Caras y Caretas*, Dec. 31, 1920, 1-10. In a recent study showing the contradictions in the opportunity that the *crónica* held for women emerging as professional writers across the Spanish-speaking Americas, Viviane Mahieux pairs Storni with Mexican writer, actor, and film critic Cube Bonifant to explore the ways in which the *crónica* was a "treacherous ally" that limited the careers of women writers while expanding their audience. She writes that the form "gave...women chroniclers the opportunity to gain visibility as writers, in popular as well as intellectual circles...enabled them to fashion original intellectual personas…[but] reinstated their location on the outskirts of literary circles." See Viviane Mahieux, *Urban Chroniclers in Modern Latin America: The Shared Intimacy of Everyday Life* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 128.

[63] Reynolds, *The Spanish American Crónica Modernista*, *Temporality & Material Culture,* 77.

to turn upon an intersection of memory, experience, labor, technology.[64] In addition to this, what both photography and film provide as indexical media is a format for experience in which the quality and strength of impressions were governed by time. Impermanence and chance become the main creative agents in a poetry based on a play of repetition and difference. Moreover, as is evident from Storni's invention of the "eye of the chronicler" in "Film marplatense," the integration of the *crónica* form with the medium of film results in construction of alternative forms of subjectivity yielding the unexplored, unpredictable creative potential of multiple perspectives, versions, as well as fields of view and fields of focus in any single landscape or social situation.

Storni's *crónica*-inspired film-poems were conceived within this moment of intense contact between literature and film technology. If the *modernistas* employed the *crónica* as the preferred literary form to capture instances of the photographic as a mass attraction that was exotic, fantastic and could illustrate the possibility that modern reality was composed of myriad viewpoints, Storni film-poem exemplify the ways in which film had captured a mass audience of viewers by the 1920s. Her film-poems expose the ways that film effects have saturated the rhythms, scale, focus, motions and colors of film of everyday life. These *crónicas* display an intimacy with uses of photography and motion

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[64] Writing that Storni's *crónicas* are conceived "in parallel to the direction of the growing movie industry of her day," Gwen Kirkpatrick describes the impulses that evolved in Storni's writing in her regular love-advice columns and the ways in which she used the *crónica* to record the experiences of temporality that constituted the sense of the modern. Kirkpatrick's analysis also shows that, through her *crónica* writing, Storni exhibited the wide range of critical thought at the basis of modernist literature. In pieces that were highly sensitive to the conflicts and contradictions in time and place she examines what I note above as the "eye of the chronicler," writing that in her love-advice columns Storni possesses a "sharp eye for details that reveal social status, the style of dress or bearing that belies provincial origin, the conventions of fashion, sentimentalism, and an uncanny perception of the changes undergone in an urban sphere rapidly transformed by immigration, industrialization, and the push and shove of the realignment of social patterns." "Alfonsina Storni as Tao Lao," *Reinterpreting the Spanish American Essay*, *Reinterpreting the Spanish American Essay*, ed. Doris Meyer (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 137-145.

pictures, and her overlapping interests in the boundaries between emotions, psyche and imagination became grounds for expressing the ways in which technologies of mass communication were gradually restructuring perception, sensation and notions of self. By invoking the brand name Kodak, the two Kodak poems also connect to a larger web of the cultural history of magazine journalism as the word was employed in the dailies, weeklies and pictorials of South America in the 1930s and with strong ties to both the actuality film and the photo essay. The name connected the *crónica* with contemporaneous multimedia print pieces that appeared under the name Kodak. The hybrid "Kodak" thus presents a microhistory of the ways that Argentine modernism was evolving its own media ecology under the pressures of imperialism.

The Two Kodaks: Imprints of Self and Empire in the Film-Poem and Photo-literary Collage in Print Media

Alfonsina Storni's two Kodak poems owe their titles to the association that had been established between the brand name and all forms of filmic practice. In the 1920s, Kodak launched a massive campaign to situate itself and its products as part of the national cultural life in cities across Latin America.[65] This included both the promotion of artistic film practices and, as the full-page advertisement from *Caras y Caretas* depicts, the

[65] Nancy Martha West's *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia* tracks Kodak advertising campaigns to uncover the complicated social history of labor, race, and gender in the early twentieth century U.S. Most intriguing in interpreting Storni's Kodak poetry is West's discussion of the "Kodak Girl," in which West relates that Kodak launched a "campaign to reinvent amateur photography as principally a woman's hobby." West describes the Kodak Girl as part of a chain of consumption of image and technology whereby women encountered a modernity that "conflated feminine beauty with the attractions of snapshot photography." The cyclical workings of identity and desire set off by the advertisements echo the visual relationships within Storni's Kodak poetry: "Appearing...as icons as consumption, their lovely fashionably dressed bodies the specific sites of advertised spectacle, Kodak Girls invite the female consumer to see themselves as reflections of their own ideal selves." See *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 53; 112-121. The Argentine magazine advertisement for Kodak Argentina in Figure 1 is based on Kodak Girl advertisements that appeared in the U.S from 1910-1916.

suggestion that Kodak cameras should be included in all activities of everyday life, at least for those with a fashionable and cosmopolitan life or those aspiring to one. In the 1920s and 1930s, the company hosted "concursos" or competitions with prizes for photographers. Kodak also created a system of registered local affiliates, or "Kodak agents" [*agentes de Kodak*] in cities in Chile, Colombia, and Argentina.[66] These agents, who were often already highly respected photographers, gained exclusive access to and rights over the sales and marketing of both Kodak still and motion picture cameras (the most popular being the "cine Kodak" portable 16mm film camera).

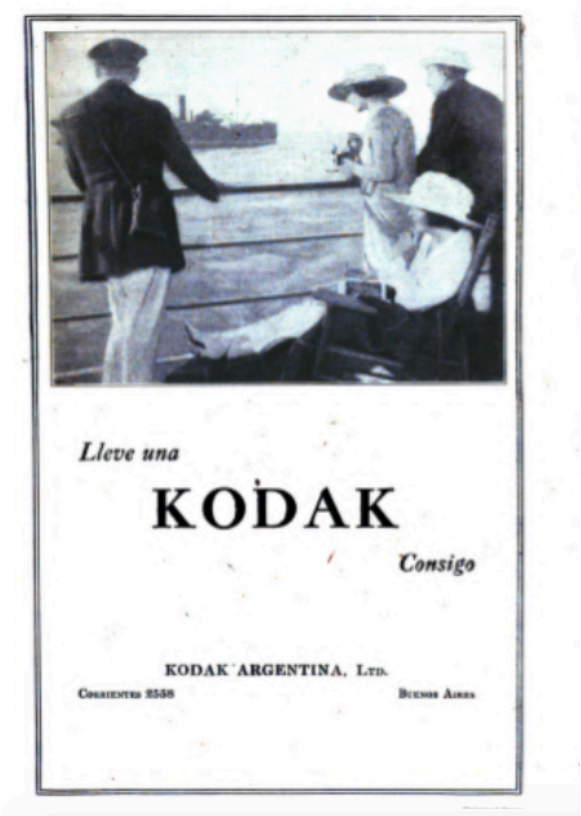

Figure 1.1 "Carry a Kodak with You": A 1920 advertisement for Kodak in *Caras y Caretas*

[66] For an example in the Chilean context that is of particular interest because several women photographers were awarded top prizes, see Alejandra Niedermaier, *La mujer y la fotografía: Una imagen espejadad de autoconstrucción y construcción de la historia* (Buenos Aires: Leviatán, 2008). The competition, and the Kodak agent system in South America, are also described in L. B. Martinez and T. S. Salgado, *Olivares valdivia: fotografía Y sociedad en Copiapó, 1909-1948* (Santiago de Chile: Pehuén, 2006), 13-40.

Kodak became synonymous with the filmic image across South America and the brand became a name for a variation within the *crónica* genre that appeared in pictorial magazines with ties to actuality films and photo collage. (Figures 1.2 and 1.3 below show examples from Peruvian magazine *Mundial*, a publication that was also notable for featuring key examples of *crónica* writing by César Vallejo and José Carlos Mariátegui). In Montevideo and Buenos Aires in the 1920s and 1930s, readers of Storni's journalism already viewed the world through various "Kodaks," as they grazed the proliferation of print media that sprung up in the newsstands. Storni's Kodak film-poems addressed an audience that understood in the brand name a colloquial suggestion of a traveling viewpoint not unlike frames of newsreel footage laid out on a page with textual commentary.

Figure 1.2 "Kodak Mundial" Photo Collage in *Mundial* (Lima), Sept. 15, 1930.

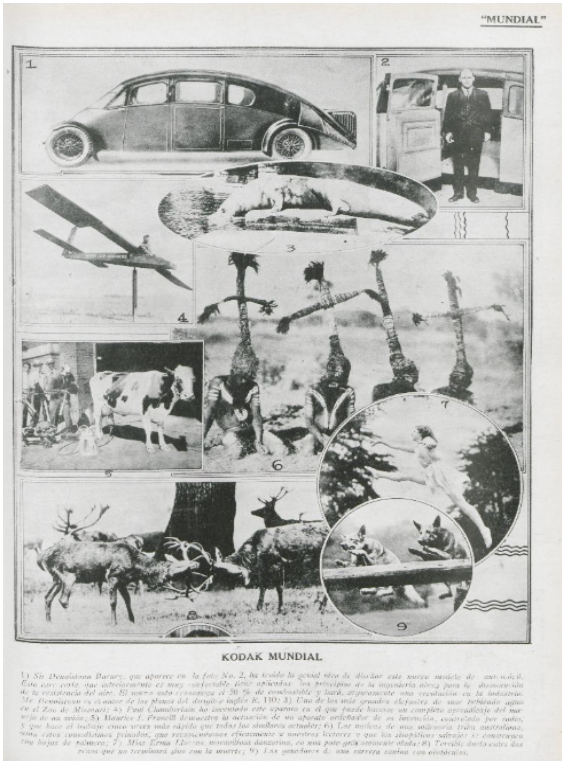

Figure 1.3 "Kodak Mundial" Photo Collage in *Mundial* (Lima), Nov. 14, 1930.

The connection between the Kodak brand name and a roving, chronicler's eye was likely reinforced by the fact that newsreels were introduced by title screens that noted their production companies. These companies included local Argentine studios like Arata-Pardo, Noticiero Rapid Film, Noticiero de Max Glücksmann and Noticias Lepage, but foreign film stock in the 1920s, and as well as the majority of international footage, was typically only through the giant and near global monopoly Kodak-Pathé (the two companies had a relationship throughout the decade began the process of merging in 1927, and Pathé had been the main Argentine supplier of film—through Casa Lepage—since film production was introduced by the founders of this company in the early 1900s).[67] Thus, within the magazine, a "Kodak" became a piece that smoothly integrated

[67]Roberto Di Chiara, *El cine mudo argentino: Las peliculas existentes en el archivo de Florencio Varela: homenaje a los 100 años de la primera exhibición cinematográfica argentina* (Argentina: Roberto di Chiara, 1996), 74-76. For a history of Kodak-Pathé see Michel Remond and François Sauteron,

graphic forms reminiscent of the newsreel—an irruption of the filmic within the written text. An impressionistic, subjective lens that could be camera, chronicler or poet, the Kodak *crónica* documented a time and place, and thus was often appended with a place name, as in an article, "Kodak Porteño," that appeared in *Mundo Argentino*, a variety magazine (see Figure 1.4).

10 EL HOGAR

KODAK PORTEÑO: TIPOS QUE PASAN

El latero que no habla nunca

Por AMERICUS

Dibujos de E. de la Portilla

El doctor Nerio Rojas, psiquiatra eminente, ha escrito bajo el epígrafe de "Psicología del latero" un ensayo digno de figurar entre los perfiles clásicos de José M. Ramos Mejía. Trátase de un boceto, también "a brochazo limpio", en el que el agudo alienista se ocupa de ese tipo verborrágico con quien tropezamos fatalmente en nuestra vida de relación y nos inunda con el incontenible palabrerío de su efusividad torrencial.

La monografía del doctor Rojas es doblemente interesante, ya que afecta a la faz científica de los estudiosos que deben conocer las obras técnicas de Krestchmer, Sigaud, Vida, Adler, Pende y Charcot, como al aspecto meramente literario de los profanos, que preferimos sus citas más accesibles de Montaigne, Dostoievski, La Bruyère, Larra, France y Verlaine, no menos

fías trágicas de las que no pueden librarnos todos los refinamientos de la civilización.

"¡Vaya un compañero para un viaje largo!", dirán un andaluz.

Año tras año, sin faltar una sola vez, cuando llega a Buenos Aires, con motivo de la Exposición Rural, Martín Ocrumbarrena, mi viejo condiscípulo del colegio secundario, dueño de la estancia "La Reserva" en Cutrió, se cree en la obligación ineludible de hacerme una visita. Nada ese es tan agradable como verlo llegar a casa, a la hora del té, con sus ropas siempre negras, su semblante franco curtido por el sol y las piernas abiertas como paréntesis, denunciando sus largas jornadas de a caballo. La visita anual de Martín Ocrumbarrena me produce en principio un placer inefable, no sólo porque es un amigo noble, leal y consecuente, sino porque me trae por una lógica asociación de ideas dulces recuerdos de mi juventud, la evocación de los momentos más felices de mi existencia.

El venturoso propietario de "La Reserva" no toma té, pero no se opone, como él dice, a "hacerme el gasto de unos mateítos". Quince minutos bastan y sobran para oír interminables informaciones que satisfacen nuestra recíproca curiosidad por lo que ha sido de nosotros en los últimos tiempos. Las noticias de mi amigo se repiten todos los años con la regularidad de un péndulo, y si hay a veces algunas variantes, es a causa de la sequía o de la lluvia

Figure 1.4 "Kodak Porteño: Tipos que pasan" in *El Hogar*, Nov 5 1937.

At the same time that Storni was experimenting with deploying the chronicler's eye of the Kodak *crónica* within her verse, Storni's contemporaries were actively exploiting the Kodak as *crónica* in their writing for Buenos Aires periodicals. The 1937 "Kodak Porteño" piece written by Argentine humorist Enrique Loncán under the pseudonym Americus takes up the topic of the "el latero," a "pest" or "bother," an urban character type that the well-to-do readership might encounter. The pseudonym is

Histoire d'une aventure: Kodak Pathé Vincennes, 1896-1927-1986 (Vincennes: Kodak-Pathé, 1986); On Kodak's monopoly and its effects on film distribution to foreign markets, see *Newsreels Across the World*, eds. Maurice Muller-Strauss and Peter Bächlin (Paris: UNESCO, 1952), esp. 54. Julio Lucchesi Moraes provides a comprehensive overview of circuits of raw film distribution in the early twentieth century in "Cinema in the borders of the world: economic reflections on Pathé and Gaumont film distribution in Latin America (1906-1915)" in *Cahiers des Amériques latines* 79 (2015): 137-153, accessed December 4, 2018, https://journals.openedition.org/cal/3680.

significant in that it suggests an authority on matters of style connected to the hemispheric worldliness of the author. The article gives the reader views of *tipos* or guys that they might encounter in the cafe circuit of Buenos Aires. In the article, the author responds to a recent book by Nacio Rojas and Loncán writes anecdotally with casual wit and humorous characterizations. The piece is accompanied by illustrations of men at leisure in various city spaces.[68]

Figure 1.5 Weekly supplement (*Revista Semanal*) to *La Nación*, Dec. 8, 1929. Storni's "Kodak" poem (right) on page 8—set askew within an article on Swiss author Victor Cherbuliez. "Kodak Teatral" photo collage (right) on page 15.

The sections of Storni's first Kodak piece—"Spirit," "Bitemark," "Voz," "Auto," "Abrasion," "Pride"—render written poetry through the medium of photography, while adopting the rambling, hybrid spirit of the *crónica* through a series of vignettes that take

[68] Terming the phenomenon "Kodak desafiante," or a "kodak challenge," to express the quality of subjectivity and casual observation—but also an engagement with the visual culture of the city—in the work poet 1920s Buenos Aires sought in the photographic medium, Francine Masiello has also noted the correspondence between the *la crónica* form and the poetic work of Alfonsina Storni's contemporary Oliverio Girondo. See Francine Masiello, *Lenguaje e ideología: Las escuelas argentinas de vanguardia* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1986), 123.

place during the course of a love affair (see Figure 1.5 for the original layout of the poem within the *Revista Semanal* supplement, as well as an example of a "Kodak" photo collage in the same issue). The title thus denotes the activity of bringing together discontinuous images and sensations. The reader of the film-poem is treated to a collection of photos with the connective logic removed. In the process of making sense of these scenes, reading becomes akin to the activity of intimately viewing a pile of found photos. To know the photographer through the way that images are selected, framed, captured, and saved becomes a process of reconstructing a connective tissue to an individual's unconscious. These are material impressions of past moments of a life, like a photograph, the poet's recollection holding traces of the movement of the very light that touched the skin, of the reactions to light that coursed through the optical nerve. The invocation of the photographic thus conducts through the film-poem a direct form of knowledge through sensation. Although impressionistic, sketched and speculative, it is a felt knowledge, as many of these terms for moments of sensory perception both denote and connote. This is to say that the poem is conducted through a haptic process of apprehension rather than abstract modes of comprehension. The poem begins within the register of the visual and optical, and the speculative. In the section called "Spirit," and thus presents the reader with a snapshot of the ways in which the poet's sentiments are bound to a memory of a particular place:

> I have arrived at your house that is in a corner of the city, sheltered by large magnolias.
> You live as if in recollection of being at the side of your mother and your father.
> I have said: I will not love again.
> And your first glance suddenly transports the ten million days of my life.

Through a visual parallel that also contains a cinematic flashback, the poem layers the snapshot of the house with memories of the lover's family.

Appropriately for a poem with an emphasis on the visual and what vision does within the world, the glance or look (*la mirada* is also the term for "gaze") is endowed with such power that it controls both time and place.[69] The next lines achieve a fusion of visual and physical contact with a series of snapshots of an individual body followed by a phrase picturing that body among a multitude:

> Body, your body among other bodies!
> Brow, your brow among others!
> Mouth, yours among other mouths
> Eyes, your eyes among other eyes

In this montage-like set of verses, Storni is fully exhibiting her proclivity for "pedestrian" repetition, nuanced by slight variations. The syntactical reiteration of individuated parts and their multiple others conjures up the individual among the masses and reveals physical desire as a mass sentiment. That is to say, the physicality of love overwhelms the senses, but there is also anxiety within being overcome, as it risks collapse of the personal into the general. As a modern mass sentiment, as a one body is singled out, love is imagined as unique between each pair of lovers but insofar as it is commonly felt it is also interchangeable as one becomes immersed in undifferentiated physical sensation.

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[69] Assuming that the scene—and the gaze—is relayed through Storni's Kodak, as the title denotes, this moment constitutes the woman's scopophilic look *back at* the gaze, while also displaying a recognition of the power that inheres in the originary gaze. Thus, Storni's film-poem could be thought of a situated upon a woman's "filmic pleasure" and the poet's eye is explicitly and overtly behind "the camera as it records the pro-filmic event" rather than "obsessively subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego." The poem thus contravenes the operation of what Laura Mulvey describes as an undisclosed presence of the gaze characteristic of Hollywood cinema. See "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema." in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), esp. 25-26.

The stanza continues by describing variants on the look, and depicting the many conflicting gazes that crowd the scene of desire and jealousy: "The look of your maid, the poor dowd from the north, devours you.../Many girlfriends come to see you." These passages merge the activity of reading with an experience of the power of the gaze. The lines are not only so much an activation of the look and its power inspired by film, but, in the register of Storni's early feminism, they also become an acknowledgement and illumination of the way looks become saturated with power or the desire for powerful emotions shared with another. The gaze, so instrumental in male-oriented narrative cinema, receives remarkably different treatment in the hands of a female poet who is a lover of the medium of film for the possibilities that it presents for capturing and recombining the erotics of looking.

The stanza "Auto" continues the play with a medium that compels a shuttling between senses, especially the fusion of the visual and tactile. This section intensifies the use of technological objects to relay sensations of physical love and thereby displays Storni's deep interest in probing machine technology as an unparalleled objective correlative for human affect. Storni draws upon the design and power associated with the automobile from which the stanza takes its title. The automobile, as heterogenous group of objects assembled into an elegant form capable of movement, but also stirring covetous emotions and the cathexis involved in desiring to control the machine, aligns with the body and mind conceived as a collection of systems of interlocking and interdependent parts. The snapshot of the car and driver recalls the frequent images of cars in the "Kodak mundial" collage, as well as in similar actuality collages found in pictorials throughout the world (see Figure 1.2 and Figure 1.3, above).

The stanza begins with an emphasis on the visual, with the image of the body of the driver seen from the back seat, but quickly shifts into a haptic register:

> From my seat I could only see the upper part of your back, your powerful shoulders pronounced in your grey suit, your tanned and primitive neck, your moist and brilliant head, and a perfect profile cut with great blows of an axe.

The felt, physical shock of a falling axe used to describe the profile, resonates back upon the preceding description of the body. The reader thus feels and sees in simultaneity.

> Suddenly, in a forceful and commanding manner, your driving hands gripped the wheel
> And the machine, docile as my heart, obeyed you in silence
> [*Y la máquina, dócil como mi corazón, te obedeció en silencio*]

The hands grip the wheel and the vehicle responds to the driver's touch with the immediacy and quickness that a body responds to a lover's imploring touch. Echoing the conflicting impulses of earlier "Bitemark," but in a more delicate way, in this passage, the technology is portrayed as obediently meeting the needs of the driver, evoking a complex scene in which a game and generous lover obeys a partner seeking to play at domination. Moreover, in contrast to the suffusion of sound that created a world of sensory fantasy in "Voice," this stanza concludes with a minimum of silence and touch. The connection between the photography and touch is asserted here in a way that will be reprised more intensely in the next stanza, "Abrasion."

In addition to referring to the automobile, the "Auto" in the title of the stanza carries the very explicit double meaning of "self" in Spanish. Automobile technology

thus becomes a doubled figure through which the reader can visualize, as if in a dream state, the way in which the power of suppressed desire materializes in an elaborate physical form. The vehicle in the poem becomes an object of fixation that brings the limits of self into view—a materialization and exteriorization of the desire and lack that are felt inwardly. Laura Marks describes images like the automobile in Storni's poem, in which looking inevitably leads to touch, as instances of a "haptic look." She writes that "haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" and that such a look that is about "loving a living but incoherent subject, an image that contains the memory of a more complete self" what Marks calls a "a kind of reverse mirror stage."[70] The technological object thus appears to the reader of the poem in a way that presents the complex of desire that constitutes the self in a sensible form.

Exhibiting the full range of sensation that the *crónica* provided for writers like Storni, each stanza of the film-poem consists of candid snapshots of the everyday—of bodies in motion, disheveled and unkempt. While they tread closely on the boundary of racy erotica, especially this last series of images of half-clothed bodies objects that inhabit a zone between fetish and fashion, these lines also represent the highly original kind of scene of sexual attraction from a woman's point of view that a journalist-poet like Storni could provide the mass audience of *La Nación*.

The technical, chemical and physical qualities of the film medium offer what Storni believed to be essential to creating a poetry to capture modern, popular experience. Such an effect is heightened by the fact that Kodak was visible in the advertisements in

[70] Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 105-106.

the magazines that Storni wrote for, offering a brand that was eager to become part of reader's leisure and family life. Storni's poem thus piggybacks on the circulation of commodities with an intimate proximity to the way in which capital inflects the lives of her readers. The poem is not, by virtue of being art or literature, perhaps, somehow separate or sacred. Both exposing the fullest of range the visual and also in achieving such a collection of everyday objects as an expression of self, "Kodak" brings into view the qualities Susan Sontag observed as the shared qualities of photography and poetry, and what she suggests modernists around the world were also seeking during the time that Storni was writing:

> The ethos of photography—that of schooling us (in Moholy-Nagy's phrase in 'intensive seeing')—seems closer to that of modernist poetry than that of painting. As painting has become more and more conceptual, poetry (since Apollinaire, Eliot, Pound, and William Carlos Williams) has more and more defined itself as concerned with the visual...Poetry's commitment to concreteness and to the autonomy of the poem's language parallels photography's commitment to pure seeing. Both imply discontinuity, disarticulated forms and compensatory unity: wrenching things from their context (to see them in a fresh way), bringing things together elliptically, according to the imperious but often arbitrary demands of subjectivity[71]

Alfonsina Storni begins the 1938 film-poem "Kodak pampeano" with a response to the criticism of a foreign tourist visiting the Argentine *pampas*. In lines that conjure up what one imagines to be a disagreeable visitor, and reiterated at the end of the poem as a traveler views the *pampas* at a distance from a train, she describes an utterance from out of the "mouth of the foreigner" ["*boca del extranjero*"] that the landscape of the pampa has no attractions. Quickly, however, the poem moves from mouth to eye, beginning

[71] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2005), 95.

another series of images that eventually trouble distinctions between still and moving image media.

In “Kodak pampeano,” the camera offers the poet an excuse to travel and the film medium opens up new avenues towards creatively rendering a location. The camera affords the freedom to roam and spy. Thinking of Storni as a poet on the move, one is drawn back to the image of the active pose of the woman holding the camera in the advertisement for Kodak published in the *Caras y Caretas* (see Figure 1.1, above). Unlike Walter Benjamin’s flâneur of the previous century, the woman with her Kodak Brownie is not abandoned within the crowd and, accordingly, is not passively in the same situation as the commodity, as Benjamin has it, but rather has taken hold of the commodity—the free-floating signifier and reproducer of Kodak’s global capital. She employs the camera poetically, subverting the conventions of perception that underlay capital’s world picture. Insistent and interfering, Storni’s use of the camera exhibits what Sontag calls the “imperious but often arbitrary demands of subjectivity" that appear whenever a camera is present. She uses the camera to assert herself—and the ideological counterpoint to both the global patriarchy and the local intellectual elite that she embodies.

VIDA DE HOY

No nos avergoncemos, pues, el reproche, antes tenemos por legítimo orgullo el que por nosotros aun sean capaces nuestros niños de bondad y de ensueño.

No matemos lo que en el alma infantil es capaz de recibir en forma integral el Bien junto con la Verdad y el ensueño de lo Bello en perfecta armonía: Verdad, Bien y Belleza, como en ninguna otra parte, están en el Evangelio.

Todo lo que es sólidamente firme y bueno es verdaderamente heroico y conquistador.

El amor cristiano, no menos que la Verdad cristiana, no conoce la neutralidad. La caridad nos urge y no nos permite permanecer indiferentes, impasibles, sin una palabra, sin un grito, ante nuestros hermanos expuestos a la suprema desgracia en la hora encantadora y tremenda de la infancia en la que el hombre elige su camino, prepara su último instante y se juega y decide su postrer destino.

No toleremos que la pereza y la fuerza de la pregracia de los niños llegue hasta los mismos que quieren despojarlos de su felicidad.

Ni a estos les deseamos mal.

Juan Carlos García Santillán

*

Después de haber escuchado la palabra de D. Angel Acuña, ex-subsecretario de Instrucción Pública y de D. J. C. García Santillán, Presidente de la Asociación de Maestros y Profesores Católicos, publicaremos en el próximo número de VIDA DE HOY un artículo de D. Pablo Pizarro sobre el mismo tema.

KODAK PAMPEANO

POR ALFONSINA STORNI

Es frecuente escuchar de boca del extranjero que el paisaje pampeano no tiene atractivos. ¿Y el color? Porque la pampa tiene color; un color.

*

Podría, ciertamente, bajarse el cielo a la Tierra y levantarse ésta al cielo y cuanto a cosas habría más en el espacio volcado con sus nubes.

*

Para la modista más ultra el carro brillante de una vaca negra sobre un tapiz de ocres rosas y verdes amarillentos.

*

Las ovejas pastando parecían, con las cabezas pegadas al suelo, grandes hongos amarillentos nacidos del humus negro.

*

Había también una loma de tierra oscura recién arada, enmarcada por dos grandes rectángulos esmeralda, y una ronda de pájaros blancos abría semilleros en el campo central.

*

Desierto de arena en pleno casco no, desierto no: una extensión de tallos dorados.

*

Pequeño el charco: un espejillo azul de pocos metros de diámetro que con un toque de dedo de mar refrescaba la tierra.

*

Cortados los pastos y amontonados en simétricos conos crearon un paisaje serrano en miniatura.

*

De pronto aparecían grandes collares negros y blancos que quebraban las lejanías: su cordón hilaba rondas de

Figure 1.6 "Kodak pampeano," in the magazine *Vida de Hoy*, number 17, February 1938.

In her study of Argentine avant-garde writers of the 1920s and 1930s, *Lenguaje e ideologia*, Francine Masiello uses the idea of the "kodak" to look at the correspondence between the imperialist gaze of the European avant-garde and the traveler's eye of the Argentine writer in the poems of Storni's contemporary Oliverio Girondo.[72] In a way that echoes the reproduction of racist and primitivist images essential to European empire-building reprinted in traveling photo-collages for South American print publications that appeared under the title "Kodak Mundial" (Figure 1.2 and Figure 1.3, above), Masiello describes the displacements of European colonialism through references made to global travel in the works of the South American lettered elite. Through the Kodak, she imagines the ambivalent "capacity of the poet to register and record that which is seen" and writes that "the traveler's format [*el formato viajero*] in literature takes the status of a discourse within the experience of the avant-garde."[73] Her image of the camera as synecdoche for the writer's experience of travel turns upon the connection between

[72] Francine Masiello, *Lenguaje e ideología*, 125-127.
[73] Masiello, 125-126.

portable camera technologies and tourist networks and the poetry of male-dominated literary circles in Buenos Aires at the time. Masiello includes Borges, Güiraldes and Girondo as "the most important participants in the version of the grand tour that was in vogue" and writes that these writers "included memories of their experiences abroad in their imaginative texts." The passage exemplifies the radical difference between Alfonsina Storni and the elite writers grouped with the Latin American avant-garde that are the subject of Masiello's research.

Masiello writes that by connecting the Latin American avant-garde to the "imperial dream" of their European colleagues, this traveler's vision offered a textual space of play, pun and irony that simultaneously established an alternative to literary practices emulating European works. However, she concludes by noting that these texts resulted in a debasement of Latin American intellectual energies into dehumanization and exploitation: "the colonial vision was a sign of the desire for control on the part of the poet and indicated a self-indulgent will to leisure and the taking on of the history of the dominant invaders."[74] Storni's Kodak presents quite the opposite, her traveler's views are intimate and domestic, and they hinge upon an effect of familiarizing spaces exoticized in foreign media. Published at the end of the 1930s, "Kodak pampeano" is a counterpoint to avant-garde experiments in exoticism and to the process of making strange entailed in "abandoning [oneself] to a dream," displacements that Borges so famously insisted could

[74] Masiello, 128. In a more recent essay that historicizes and interrogates the tensions between Euro-American and Latin American intellectuals, Martín Bergel traces the overlap of hegemony and visual technology agreeing with Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones and Oscar Terán to note that the conception of the portable Kodak paralleled the events of Spanish-American war of 1898 and thus represented an early confluence of military and media technology that eventually resulted in both the first wave of "Latin American anti-imperialism" and in a simultaneous "novel inscription in the communicational framework that altered the map of modernity." "América latina, pero desde abajo: Prácticas y representaciones intelectuales de un ciclo histórico Latinoamericanista, 1898-1936" in *Cuadernos de Historia* 36, June 2012, 10.

capture Argentina in "The Argentine Intellectual and Tradition."[75] Of course, although Storni's work confronts both the male-dominated traditions of gaucho genre literature, Sontag's statement indicates the potential problems that must also be kept in mind when considering Storni as a white middle-class woman of European descent entering into this colonized landscape with her camera: the pampas is highly contested, as both a literary and geographic space. Josefina Ludmer describes the literature of this place as "regional economies entered into the world market," revealing that "the gaucho, the Indian and the black were the producers of national wealth."[76]

Written less than a year before her suicide, and published in the anti-imperialist and socialist political activist Manuel Ugarte's literary magazine *Vida de Hoy* (see Figure 1.6), Storni's film-poem draws the eye of the Argentine reader back upon the land as a

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[75] In this regard, the poem is linked to Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's 1933 *Radiografía de la pampa,* which employed metaphors of graphic media to present a philosophical outline of Argentine social contradictions. Although Storni's much more modest poem presents views of the pampa as a field for poetic flight Martínez Estrada's work should be considered a precedent to the poem because of the book's vast intellectual impact on Argentine letters at the moment that Storni was writing the poem. Storni also shared a close mutual friend with Martínez Estrada in Horacio Quiroga. Martínez Estrada's book is thus an important intertext in considering Storni's feelings towards the pampa as an overdetermined symbol of Storni's adopted Argentine homeland—both writers had spent periods of their early life in the Argentine interior and, as such, each present examples of a modernism, emerging in Argentine literature, that was opposed to cosmopolitanism and in which both writers were creating connections between the psyche, regional culture, and intimately known features of the landscape. See Ezequiel Martínez Estrada. *Radiografía de la Pampa* (Madrid: ALLCA XX, 1997).

[76] Josefina Ludmer, *El género gauchesco* (Buenos Aires: Perfil, 1988), 10-11. In *Lenguaje e ideologia*, Masiello notes a combination of urbane cynicism and simplistic idealism in writers of the Argentine avant-garde with works set in the pampas, but Ludmer's later book *El género gauchesco* complicates the earlier study. Josefina Ludmer considers the gaucho genre—and the literary construction of pampas as foundational fictional space for a country conceived with no institutions or literature. She writes of the genre literature of the gaucho and the pampa as a link between nineteenth-century nationalists, modernizers, progressives and twentieth-century literary elite. Through literature referencing the symbolism of the pampa, the avant-garde elaborate an earlier project of establishing a unified state and language, and revive the utopian work of state-building. Writing about Argentina's interior landscapes thus becomes a literary enterprise of creating a literature that contained heterogeneous discourses of race and class within an idea of the popular (see, especially, Chapter Two, "Desafío y lamento, los tonos de la patria"). Critiques of the fusion of colonialism, racism, and modernization in the pampa and other rural spaces did exist in some works of some South American avant-garde writers, especially in the work of Cesar Vallejo. See Patrick Dove, "The Catastrophe of Modernity: Vallejo's *Trilce* between Indigenism and the Avant-Garde," in *The Catastrophe of Modernity: Tragedy and the Nation in Latin American Literature* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004).

meditation on the porous line between life and death and between the particular and universal. Her snapshots of the arid Argentine interior stand out as a poetic photo essay that documents the ways in which the surreal imagery and outlandish poetic comparisons of her poems ultimately spring from an organic and physical source that is inseparable from the living presence of animal, plant, and mineral of Argentina. The landscape she describes sustains her body and gives her a home and is the source of an indissoluble intimacy. Thus she explores the contradictions of her life from a vantage based on a felt intimacy with her home, rather than from within the anxiety of influence that affected the male writers of the avant-garde and put them in a protracted dialogue with the European intellectual elite.[77]

"Y el color?" The narrator asks at the beginning of the film-poem. The line is a fragment, but is uttered in response to the foreigner's impudent declaration that the pampa has no color. She continues, "the pampa has color; one color," which within the context of photography immediately brings to the reader's mind an intriguing puzzle: what is a photo with one color? This photo-poem explores "one color" and the infinitude of shades, hues, variations—and accompanying sensory and emotional experience—that a single color, fully given its due, can encompass.[78]

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[77]In this light, the continued popularity of Storni's poems can be traced to how Storni's poetry renders the interconnectedness of mental health, emotional life, ecology, introspection, and temporality through images that blend and confuse the terms of the human and of nature. Storni writes of herself in the poem "Palabras a mi madre": "my soul is completely fantastic, a traveler/ And who has wrapped herself in a cloud of light madness" ["*mi alma es toda fantastica, viajera,/ Y la envuelve una nube de locura ligera*"]. "Palabras a mi madre," *Obras I*, 278.

[78] In terms of the ways in which Storni's film-poem attempts a radically different kind of poetic sense, or "feeling," one might also remember Walter Benjamin's statement that color gives immediate access to a unified and immersive terrain of the imagination and "the imagination never engages in form, which is the concern of the law." Likewise, Storni uses color as an avenue towards a kind of creativity in which she can deviate from the demands of form, as well as resist the juridical apparatus from which formal demands arise. Thus, rather than the plethora of alternative forms and experimental forms through which modernist poets sought to subvert centuries of poetic convention—one might think of Apollinaire's experiments

The poem's title and 1936 publication link it to the 1935 invention of color still photography, the Kodachrome technology patented by Leopold Godowsky and Leopold Mannes. Equipment for producing colored photos was commercially available in a limited way to the public beginning in 1935, with the Kodak amateur reversal film, but, because of the high price of film and development, color photography remained a hobby among the cosmopolitan elite. However, for those aware of developments in photography during this year, and Storni was certainly among them, 1935 and 1936 were marked by a frenzy of interest in the topic. In this regard, the film-poem's opening stanza and its meditation on color is a timely statement on the medium of film and the global effects of the development of new film technology.

Jeffrey Geiger draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings on color, and Martin Heidegger's concept of the world picture, to examine the ways in which the advent of color technology for still photographs altered perceptions of realism in ways that buttressed the ideological foundations of U.S. economic imperialism in the Pacific. He writes that "in film, color is...a kind of illusion and prone to subjective interpretation across varied experiences" and that "amateur color travelogs" of the 1930s and 1940s "[inhabited] an unstable contact zone between uncanny difference and intimate closeness, fantastical and indexical."[79] Although Geiger's study is of travel photographs in the South Pacific and he does not describe the relationship of this zone of imperialism with the

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with textual form or imagist experiments minimalism, for example—color gives the poet a freedom that comes from formlessness. "A Child's View of Color," *Selected Writings*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 51.

[79] Jeffrey Geiger, "The Voyager's Sublime: Kodachrome and Pacific Tourism," *Anglo-American Imperialism and the Pacific* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 130-150. The new representational complexities of color technology notwithstanding, and as is evident from the "Kodak Mundial" pieces (Fig. 2.2 and Fig. 2.2), the amplification of the exploitative and racist traveler's gaze through the camera exists within the very invention of photographic technologies.

Southern Cone, Storni's invocation of color at the beginning of "Kodak pampeano" indicates that, with her interest in photography and her participation in commercial print media, she was drawn into the new paradigm that Geiger describes. New color views were becoming widely available that accentuated the "foreignness" of famous locales, and the pampas were among those drawn into this media technology boom.[80] Countering the instability of interpretation that color creates, Storni presents the landscape as thrillingly monochromatic. The film-poem's opening dwells on color, presenting a response to the new regime of perception and affect launched with color travel photography. The poem resists modes of representation that render whole swathes of the world into imperial objects of desire, disdain or neglect.

COLOR HABRA INVADIDO ENTERAMENTE LA PANTALLA"

(director Rouben Mamoulian)

Figure 1.7 "Color Will Completely Invade the Screen": Frances Dee with a Costume Expert in an article from the June 1935 issue of *Cinegraf* titled "In One or Two Years Color Will Have Invaded the Entire Screen." The article discusses the premiere of the first technicolor film, *Becky Sharp* (dir., Rouben Mamoulian). At the time the article was published in 1935, the film had not actually debuted in most parts of the world.

[80] My reading of the ways in which color in Storni's film-poem works as an encounter with empire brings together Geiger's insights on color in photography with Rosalind Krauss' concept of the "view," which she opposes to "landscape" as an example of a visual field that she regards as part of the "proto-history" of cinema and "composes an image of a geographic order." She traces the idea of the photographic view to technologies of travel stereography dating back to the mid-nineteenth century and writes that "the spatiality of a view, its insistent penetration, functions…as the sensory model for a more abstract system whose subject is also space." See "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (1982): 313-315.

As an article in the Argentine film magazine *Cinegraf* exemplifies, 1935 and 1936 can be understood as the year of the color film (see Figure 1.7). The publication of "The Kodachrome Process for Amateur Cinematography in Natural Colors" by Leopold Mannes and Leopold Godowsky in the *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* in July 1935 was quickly followed up in media outlets around the world by a proliferation of articles about the promise of color film. However, color remained the proprietary technology of the imperial center: desired by photographers and photo-lovers the world over, while the film and processing technology only circulated in a limited supply.[81] Although the materials for producing color moving images or photographs were not available, color technologies being developed in the U.S. were heralded around the world as a new paradigm for mass culture. In 1935 and 1936, while worldwide print media was abuzz with stories of the revolutionary changes color was bringing to the screen, color images remained a fantasy out of reach in mediaspheres outside of Europe and the United States.[82] Movie fans and photography enthusiasts were treated to tantalizing reports of the coming changes, and eventually to viewing foreign films and

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[81] In a series of historical ironies that retrospectively color, so to speak, Storni's poem, the first Argentine color motion picture, *El gaucho y el diablo* (dir. José María Fernández Unsáin), would also attempt to render the pampas in color (using locally-developed Anscocolor technology), would not in fact be made until 1952. The film would never be exhibited due to a company bankruptcy resulting from a continuing film stock shortage that began in the years after World War Two, when the United States placed limits on exports of raw film stock to Argentina and turned towards the Mexican government and film industry that could more easily be influenced in favor of U.S. interests. The story of the failed color film project and the bankruptcy of the Emelco studio was reported in *Variety* in May, 1952. See *Variety*, Tuesday May 27th, 1952.

[82] Agfacolor, employing a process similar to Kodachrome, was introduced in Europe in 1937. Sales of the new technology to consumers in Europe was interrupted by the war and the product would not be widely available until 1949. See Helmut Gernsheim, *A Concise History of Photography* (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), esp. 28.

pictorial magazines in full color; but as Geiger attests, color was a clearly a property of—and proprietary technology of—American hegemonic capital—a sign of the imminent economic and cultural dominance of the United States. Likewise, Argentine film magazines—such as *Cine-mundial*—continued to be printed primarily in black and white in the years following the craze for color film, but Kodak published full-color ads for its color film technology in these magazines (see Figure 1.8). The 1935 *Cinegraf* article's title is highly significant in this context: the colors that would "invade" the screen carried with them an actual feeling of a cultural invasion; an invasion of senses transmitted from these new centers of imperialism that ultimately exhibited only the continued technological dominance of global economic centers.

Figure 1.8 *Cine-mundial*, February 1939, page 2. Full color advertisement for Kodachrome featuring a "reproduction" of Kodak color film imagery (The majority of images in *Cine-mundial* were in black and white, with only select ads featuring elements of color).

Storni's film-poem issues a challenge to this invasion of color. "Kodak pampeano" quickly appeals to the reader's sensibilities for the fantastic and associates the space with the creative possibilities entailed in this absurdist, unreal skewing of perspective—the pampa is not technicolor, and Storni will not put its images in service of the mimetic illusionism that is entailed therein. Instead, the film-poem consists of simple variations in shades of one or two primary colors, and of light and dark; it thereby

attempts to depict a subtle grandeur capable of dazzling the viewer. Consistent with a purist whose love of photography attends to the minute variations of the physical properties of light and optics, Storni's film-poem makes the case that the beauty of a landscape lies in the simplicity of the sharp contrasts that are present in the relationship between a few colors rather than in a scene oversaturated with numerous colors. Through play with the possibilities of the monochromatic and sustained experiments in the isochromatic, "Kodak pampeano" invites the Argentine reader to revisit the surface forms of the storied landscape that shape the local psyche by constructing a perception of space, light, and color. Moreover, she presents this local picture to confront the cultural hegemony of globally circulating visual attractions. The heightened aesthetic of the landscape has an even more profound effect as the poem ends with contrapuntal note of death, desolation, and corruption.[83]

In the second stanza, the reader experiences the indefinite boundaries of space on the pampas. Contrasting with space fixed as a geographical abstraction, the scene conveys a vastness that leads to an apparent intermingling of sky and earth. In her photographic—rather than geographic—portrayal of the pampas, earth and sky are not separate entities, but must be considered as unified and linked:

> One could, certainly, lower the sky to the plain and raise that up to the sky and there would be so many more things in this space spilling over with its clouds

[83] In much the same way, Brazilian filmmaker Nelson Pereira dos Santos' 1963 film *Vidas secas* captures the Brazilian *sertão*. Pereira dos Santos' film juxtaposed the simple physical beauty of the space captured on film with the protagonists' bleak struggle to survive.

Sky and earth come together within the camera viewfinder, and the opening stanza creates the sense that the poem's imagery will unfold in the seemingly inexhaustible depth of field that the pampa brings before the eyes.

From the initial declaration that the pampa is one color, Storni moves to imagining color arising from internally defined contrasts. That is to say, for one who comes into a close intimacy with this place, color is not a result of photochemical process, but rather the immediate relationships within the image bring about sensations of color. The image focuses closer: "For the most fashionable [*ultra*] dressmaker [*modista*] the brilliant leather of a black cow over a tapestry of rose ochre and yellowed greens." Farm animals are elevated to subjects of photography that throw into confusion questions of form and scale. Changes in scale and focus result in new filmic effects, as colors emerging through contrast with the ostensible uniformity continue to create striking visual attractions out of simple materials: "The pasturing sheep seem, with their heads stuck to the dirt, great yellow mushrooms born from black humus."

The first passage also attests to the subtle social subversion made possible by the heterogeneity of Storni's mass readership. The encounter between the *modista*, or creator of fashionable dresses, and the cow upturns the conventional imagery of the pampa, which in popular culture is almost exclusively conveyed within a frontier iconography associated with the masculine working class with social rituals linked to male gender expectations linked to romanticized ideas of rural labor practices. The stanza thus invites certain readers to transgress gender norms, as a male reader of *Vida de Hoy* would experience this space conventionally linked to masculinized visions of rural self-

preservation through associations with urban fashion.[84] Indeed, the way that the images are redeployed is fitting, as the outfit of the gaucho, the pride that this figure takes in his clothing and equipment, often rises to the level of fetish in many *gauchesque* texts and films.[85]

Above the plain, the view centers upon a dense flock of swallows with a "movement characteristic of a swarm of flies" [*el movimiento característico del enjambre de moscas]*. Storni writes of this "swarm" in a photographic mode that becomes self-referential to the medium itself. The group of swallows is transformed into one unified image of a "cinta," a word describing a tape-like form that is also a synonym for a strip of film: "Above pallid light-blue sky there is a compact band of swallows, a backlit tape/filmstrip that goes on for seven blocks." Metaphorically transforming the transparent blackness of the swallows into light showing through film, the band of birds also presents an image through which Storni depicts a natural analogue to the human-made technology of film, as the sun projects its light through a strip of near blackness. These lines bring to mind the origins of film, drawing back beyond the medium itself to more fundamental activities of observation of the world by way of the properties of light as it transmitted off objects and appears to the senses through translucent media.

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[84] The film-poem resonates with works of Storni's contemporaries, most notably Arlt's mentor Guidraldes' *Don Segunda Sombra*—a nostalgic Bildungsroman in which male identity is described in an organic connection to cycles of seasonal labor on the pampa. In Argentine films of the same period, most prominently leftist director José Ferreya's 1937 *Besos Brujos*, starring Libertad Lemarque, the masculinized pampa creates a popularly recognizable setting for audiences to work out conflicting values associated with gender and class. In *Besos Brujos*, a modern urban woman comes to a rural town and must fight off the advances of a male laborer by whom she is eventually kidnapped and kept captive.

[85] This may even be described as a cultural effect of the appeal of images of the gaucho circulated globally, with Rudolph Valentino's 1921 portrayal of a gaucho in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (dir. Rex Ingram), representing a high point in the world's fascination with gaucho fashion. Examples abound, with local Argentine male stars even performing in the role of rural cowboys and tango singers, most notably Carlos Gardel in his tours in France and Spain. See Simon Collier, *The Life, Music & Times of Carlos Gardel* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986), 76-81.

The film-poem continues by presenting myriad variations on single color as they open up to reveal a visual complexity that can only be described by way of fusing primary colors with effects of sound: "The symphony of red above green has engrossed me for a long time, as the cattle continually changed place and posture and white spots in their hides changed places." As with the earlier Kodak poem, the lines carry the connotation that immersion in the filmic is a fundamentally synesthetic experience. After all, these sensations of color might be figments of the viewer's imagination as they under brought under the spell of the filmic medium. However, as the poem switches to a language of color, in the next stanza, a greyscale stands even more than these mesmerizing blocks of color, as "a statue of bone against a curtain of greys." The term for curtain, *telón*, framing the image in the film theater, evokes an immersive cinematic space that surrounds viewers as they perceive the filmic image. This curtain as background conveys the sense that the viewer's experience is entirely in the realm of image, with no way to seek a reality that escapes the filmic mediation that the poem has constructed.

The poem's view lingers on a small pool, a "charco," and the water—an image that in Storni's poems becomes associated with both lens and screen. The passage describes the pool as a mirror, but Storni refers to it with an idiom that renders the pool in technical terms, as she describes its "diameter: "a little blue mirror of a few meters in diameter with a touch of the sea's finger refreshes the earth." With this invocation of the lens-like pool, the film-poem reiterates the sensation created in the last stanza that the experience of the poem is encompassed by filmic mediation. The viewer glimpses the pool and sees in its mirror mimesis and the originary recognition of self in the mirror. Of

course, present in this gathering of optical metaphors is also a fragment of "the sea," a natural figure Storni constantly returns to in her poetry to discuss the self and alienation, and which Storni had also equated with the screen in "Mar de Pantalla."

The image of the pool launches the viewer into a visual range with entirely new dimensions where depth and focus take on elasticity and fluctuation. One might also recall the viewfinder on a Kodak Brownie camera that contained a mirror creating an effect of a virtually captured space with the objects in the field of view in focus. The next stanza, as well as the subsequent five stanzas, become a succession of poetic manipulation of size and distance. The vast plain of the pampas becomes a site of experimentation in focal length, as the poet practices focusing of the great lens of the chronicler's eye. In these stanzas, she tests the sharpness of its focus and its ability to capture detail and to express topographical immensity, making the boundaries between the immense and the microscopic indiscernible. The flock of birds becomes "necklaces" of "black and white" against a massive field of vision [*collares negros y blancos*]:

> Suddenly the great black and white necklaces appeared and broke [through] the distance: its cords spun round the cows and sheep

Neatly stacked bales of grass take on the proportion of mountains:

> The cut grasses, plied in symmetric cones created a mountain landscape in miniature

The scale even brings into question the very existence of smaller objects, which become swallowed up like pixels within a digital or newsprint picture of astonishing resolution.

These same objects, however, gathered collectively in masses to gain their own ocean-like immensity:

> Small wild flowers; absorbed, if they [ever] existed, by the space; but, like the swallows, for the most part, they grouped together in immense squares of only one tone, blue, yellow, purple, until their waves touch the feet of the sky

In the two stanzas that follow, two depictions of almost unimaginable vastness compete in the viewer's eye. The first is so large that it scales back the entire scene, as if the camerawoman had suddenly pushed the focus to infinity: "And erasing all details was a mantle of infinite greens below and above all a canopy of infinite greys" In an effect only describable for Storni through the technology of film, the scene is zoomed out in such a way that all minute detail is lost. All detail merges in the visual field into seemingly abstract forms of great magnitude. The description creates the effect of a great vista and a scene that inspires awe in magnitude alone. However, what is even more remarkable in this filmic play of scale and focus is that the even larger entity beyond this—the one that frames this place as experience—is not readily visible: "And exceeding all: the homes, the trees, the animals, the men, only she herself [*solo ella misma*], the pampa, does not stand out." The greater expanse of the land exists on another level of pure sensory excess, a transmutation of the familiar into an experience of the sublime, with a scope beyond the seemingly-infinite mediation of the lens and that accords with, and shapes, the local psyche, in a way that the effects of filmic tropes of perception cannot even capture.

The final stanzas contain a strangely foreboding picture, in which the view of the camera falls upon a rural cemetery. Storni uses the passage as a flight into fantasy, which doubles as a link to mythology that renders the place timeless and ancient:

> In the green solitude, the Queen of Death had her refuge: suddenly strange flowers of stone emerged in the flatland...discolored crosses and angels stuck through.
> A lurking cow close to the cemetery...an ombú tree without leaves, twisted and ochre, that had been there but had grown in the inferno; and a little more distant, black and immobile, the Stygian lake

The ombú tree—also known in Spanish as the *bellasombra*, or beautiful shade—stands out amid a harsh scene that contains only signifiers of suffering and death for human inhabitants. A resilient tree protected by toxic sap, the ombú is the native tree most identified with the pampas and renowned in pampas lore for giving life and shelter. Rather than adding a touch of realism, the poetic breaks the filmic surface of the text and, for a moment, carries the image of the tree into the field of the Peircean symbolic. As such, the tree becomes a web of references and interpretations. From the written common name of the tree, ombú, a loanword from the Southern Cone indigenous Guaraní language, unfolds the oldest histories of contact and colonialism in this continent. It is no surprise then that symbol persists as the lasting among a scene of death. The misery in this beautiful land, like so much of the world, is a never-ending consequence of historical cycles of colonialism.

Finally, the film-poem suddenly shifts back to a distant point of view, leaving only residue of the overwhelming encounter of immediate sensory contact with

the land that just transpired. The viewer is returned to the beginning, in the place of the foreigner, distantly removed from the landscape:

> But from the train you cannot touch the greasy and recently opened earth, nor can you breathe its epic humidity, nor will it let you fall into the shameful painted faces

The final passage resonates with the association of trains in early-twentieth-century Argentina with foreigners. At the time, Argentine socialist intellectuals like Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz were beginning to equate the railroad with invisible mechanisms of foreign imperialism embedded across the South American continent. Imagining the scene in this context, the point of view of the final vignette can thus be imagined as the vision of a passenger on a system of trains that were run by the British, but built with Argentine capital to move British goods.[86] On the train, the foreigner can travel the country and experience it in much the same way that they might view a photograph in a travel magazine, featuring the space as a flat and washed-out wasteland.

As exemplified in the pictorials on lifestyle, travel and film that featured sections like the Kodak Mundial, consumption of globalized mass culture relied on passive viewing as an image passing *through* the eyes. The combination of the photographic and

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[86] Scalabrini Ortiz wrote a range of texts, both history and fiction, over the course of his life. Around the time that Storni's poem was written, Scalabrini Ortiz was a key figure in a larger political movement of anarchist, anti-imperialist politics of which Storni was no doubt aware. Scalabrini Ortiz' agitation activities included writing pamphlets on British capital and railroads in Argentina and in 1940 he published *Historia de los ferrocarriles argentinos*, which summarized these earlier texts and was one of the texts with the greatest influence upon later historiographers seeking to understand the political roots of debt, dependency, and poverty in Latin America. Juan Perón said of Scalabrini Ortiz: "It was he who shaped the entire nature of the resistance to the usurpers, elucidating what everyone else sought to discover—the causes of the Argentine defeat, he was a born fighter…[and] he made me the recipient of his political testament." See Enrique Pavón Pereyra, *Coloquios con Perón* (Madrid: Editores Internacionales, 1973), 59-60.

poetic medium in Storni's film-poem is a fusion of the activity of reading and viewing. The poem thus intensifies and focuses the resources of the photographic medium and in the reading of an image seizes the viewer's attention, inviting them to linger and dwell in a place. Storni's "Kodak pampeano" is an encounter with the pampas that operates through sensations of distance and intimacy that ultimately evoke presence through perception in much the same way that the earlier Kodak poem, by animating a reader's physical desire, captures the sensation of touching the body of the lover.[87]

Film Marplatense: Storni's Mar de Plata Film-poem and *la crónica* as Documentary Moving Image

Storni opens "Film marplatense" with the line, "I had not come to discover Mar del Plata." The next line explicitly names the form of work and explains that these *crónicas* were "written on the fly" [*a vuela pluma estas crónica*].[88] The observations of this film-poem are not new—she had not come to "discover," but to record. As a hybrid of *crónica* and film, the piece contains effects that create a sensation of a rolling sequence of spontaneous, real-time and unscripted scenes. This is a paradoxical hybridity that presents the deep conflicts shared by a range of modern mass cultural forms, namely, sensational forms of both exhibit the promise of immediacy and verisimilitude, but are inevitably accompanied by the feeling of belatedness—that which has been recorded has already passed. Accordingly, she thus first consciously addresses this film-poem as a

[87]The two poems provoke a question of great significance for thinking about the relationship between body and media, namely, does sensation begin in the subject or the object? In the essay "Cezanne's Doubt," Maurice Merleau-Ponty makes the case that such sensations actually begin with and emanate out from the idea of object. See Marceau Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt" in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern, 1964), 9-24.

[88] Storni, *Obras: Tomo I: Poesía*, 1007.

reproduction and representation—directly referring to the technology behind the medium itself: "The lens [*el objectivo*] opens and shuts" and "seizes a color, a gesture, a line."[89] Of course, the invocation of the word "*el objetivo*" for lens not only specifies that this is specifically a camera lens (as opposed to a simple lens used for eyeglasses) it also affords the poet a moment of semiotic play, as the word also denotes the several levels of signification that also exist in the English term "objective." The word refers also to both "target" and "goal" (for example, denoting the subject of a non-fiction film), and plays with the idea (or at least the possibility of) poetry written objectively, in the sense of the impersonal or impartial. The addition of "gesture" to the "color" and "line" that were already part of the earlier poems reaffirms the "film" of the title. This poem will consist of a capture of moving images and sounds relayed through a motion picture camera. Rather than the now roughly synonymous words *pelicula* or *cine*, the borrowed term "film" is the word used by fans of movies in Argentina during this period for a motion picture.

Through these revelations of the material basis of her film-poem, she simultaneously recognizes the limits of the medium. Film seemingly possesses the closest relationship to the real, however the indexical qualities of medium never entirely negate the work being pressed into the service of mimesis within a larger cultural field. Storni's poem begins with the same set of anxieties and tensions that would later typify films of the cinéma vérité movement. These initial lines give the reader the first experience of the poem as taking place within the world of a documentary film.[90]

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[89] Storni, 1007.

[90] As the connections between the Kodak poems and the "Kodak Mundial" articles indicate, Storni's film-poems are closely linked to actuality and newsreel films. Of course, the connections between actuality and documentary do not constitute a simple or direct lineage. By the early 1930s filmmakers like John

The poem shifts to capture a vast scene from far away, as if with a long shot, with "the multitude" crowding in a seaside area—most likely what is now known as the Playa Bristol. The rhythm and syntax of the poem emulate a series of cuts: "now on the beach, now the roulette, now on the promenade" [*ya en la playa, ya la ruleta, ya en la rambla*].[91] Rambla Lasalle near Playa Bristol was well known for its roulette wheels and the vivacity of the scene parallels contemporary descriptions. The sequence recalls the evocation of the multitudes at Coney Island in a famous *crónica* by José Martí, in which he describes as an "immense valve of pleasure opened to an immense people…dining rooms that, seen from afar, look like the encampments of armies…long carpets of heads, the daily surge of a prodigious people on to a prodigious beach, this mobility…faculty for progress… enterprise...fevered rivalry in wealth."[92]

One step removed from the action itself, Storni describes the camera as it works to capture the scene. She writes that as the people pass, the camera "continually snatches their profiles" and then switches to the camera's view, describing the way that "the sea changes their skin and posture at every moment" [*escamotea continuamente sus perfiles; el mar cambia a cada momento de pellejo y posturas*].[93] In the next line, in a brief and jarring description of action in the background, a swimmer is pulled away into the surf,

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Grierson had begun to theorize the defining characteristics of documentary. Invoking the other non-fiction film form, Grierson's pithy 1926 declaration of documentary as "a creative treatment of actuality" could double as an accurate description of *crónica* genre. *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), 13. Documentary was a filmmaking mode that has asserted a presence throughout Argentina's film history, reaching a high point in the 1950s and 1960s, with the works of Fernando Birri, Fernando Solanas, and Octavio Getino. Argentine documentary in this period was closely allied with local leftist political reportage. Some of the origins of this predilection for film documentary can be ascribed to—and has direct economic roots in—the numerous early education film, industrial film, and newsreel studios that proliferated in the 1910s and 1920s in Argentina. See Alicia Alted Vigil and Susana Sel, *Cine educativo y científico en España, Argentina y Uruguay* (Madrid: Editorial Universitaria Ramón Areces, 2016), 33-42.

[91] Storni, *Obras: Tomo I*, 1007.

[92] Jose Martí, "Coney Island," *Selected Writings*, trans. Esther Allen (New York: Penguin, 2002), 92.

[93] Storni, *Obras: Tomo I*, 1007.

unseen, to drown: "the wave swallows its victim...bringing her to its moist depths, without anyone seeing."[94] This absurdist touch catches the reader completely by surprise, this also creates an undercurrent in the poem that carries an awareness of the cold indexicality of the technology of the camera—the camera "snatches," and becomes unflinching witness of human life and death amidst all else that it records and the trail of visible evidence that film inevitably holds.

The film-poem is organized around a recurring sound motif. Storni describes the orchestra playing in the background as "the sea dances below and the people dance above." The movements of the sea are captured by the camera-eye of the poet, but the sound of the orchestra suffuses the scene. The full sensory experience of audiovisuality comes to the fore—the poem takes on a special effect from what Michel Chion calls synchresis, "a weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and a visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time" as the poem plays with an uneven joining of sound and image, the moving sea becomes harmonized with melodies of tango music.[95] The images of the movement of bodies are also transformed as they become welded to the musical phrases—raised up to become the point of focus: "the orchestra tames the song of the sea: the tango exalts the muscles of the feet that want to break the leather of the shoes and bend them into arches."[96]

Sound is relayed through the poem as a powerful force, as pervasive and all-encompassing in natural phenomenon—like the sounds of the sea in the poem—as it is in human social life and perhaps more powerful to the human sensory perception than

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[94] Storni, 1007.
[95] Michel Chion, *Film, A Sound Art*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), 63.
[96] Storni, *Obras: Tomo I*, 1008.

vision. In what would be obvious to moviegoers immersed in the films of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, William Powell and Myrna Loy, or, since the introduction of sound synchronization in the Argentine film industry, Hugo del Carril and Libertad Lemarque. Storni's poem reiterates that film in the late 1930s is a medium defined more by sound than by the visual. As such, the orchestra surfaces throughout the poem and those that are not absorbed in and synchronized with its sounds are the exception.

The orchestra's music frames the dance of a couple, called "*enamorados*," so taken with love and immersed in the movements of their dancing that they continue to take a few steps after the orchestra has paused. Storni writes of the couple that they stand out; they "seem made of a substance distinct from the rest of the masses." [*parecen hechos de sustancia distinta al resto de la masa*]. In this passage, sound is the substance of the modern masses, and the couple is made of something different that leaves them both out of sync and out of step. The line glimpses Storni in her continual preoccupation with the modern sentiment of love, which she also takes up in her advice columns as "Tao Lao," the paradox that this shared and universalized mass sentiment is also one that separates and individuates. She writes that under the influence of love, the young woman places her head on the man's shoulder in a way that recalls "a star that has lost its orbit." Another stanza, "Estudiante Porteña," contains a portrait of a boy native to Buenos Aires. Imagined audiovisually through music and dance, the orchestra animates his movements: "no one dances better than he, nor communicates such personal sympathy." The passage portrays sound and dance as channels for both regional and Argentine identities. Moving to one's local music constitutes a mirror stage of a culture, a process of self-recognition and the formation of subjectivity through the mirror of media. However, in the film the

chronicler's eye reveals something more than music and dance can—something very dark lies behind this cultured exterior. A close-up of the boy's hands scales down to the level of the microscopic and then cuts in montage to another grotesque scene, switching to the chronicler's first-person perspective, the poem relates the secrets that this cultured exterior hides: "I know this refined hand runs over the anatomy of the back and presses as if it is tallying the cells and performing an exam...the same that hurls dead fingers over the walls of the hospital at passerby."

Not unlike the structure of a 1930s Hollywood musical, these scenes are presented as digressions, secondary to the primary sequence of events featuring a line of dancers.[97] The dancers present a visual array of contrasts that sets the cast of characters for the rest of the poem. Taking the form of documentary footage, featuring an ethnographic gallery of social types amassed together from across Argentina and around the world, in a single line of this stanza Storni works in contrasts that exemplify the complicated relationship between art and life that is present in documentary filmmaking. The group of dancers lined up on the beach are "heterogeneous" but also "as leaves brought together from the four [compass] points of the city" [*el desfile de parejas heterogéneas agrupadas en el balneario como el viento junta las hojas de los cuatro puntos de la ciudad*]. The line combines a poetic metaphor evoking movement with explicitly non-poetic descriptions, or at a vocabulary that feels highly abstract and specialized. The line contains the effect of montage within a documentary film, and as Sergei Eisenstein famously remarked in his writing on montage the intensity, tension and rhythm of which is increased by the

[97] The dancers are likely performing a *pericón*, a dance that was, along with tango, frequently filmed as a subject of early actuality films in Argentina. The most famous early film version was *El Pericón Nacional*, by the Podestá brothers in 1901. See Manuel Pampín, *La historia del tango: Sus orígenes* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor. 1976).

degree to which the images are incongruous.[98] The image of blown leaves follows that of the line of couples described as if it were a catalogue of anthropological photos, creating an association between the two. Finally, the next shot documents the row of "couples" more closely: "The reckless of Buenos Aires, the timid and somewhat pedantic people from the province [the outskirts of the city and suburban areas surrounding Buenos Aires historically considered as one region], the rough and scornful person of the country, the well-off European."

The next stanza consists of a close-up of "the well-known pair," or "notorious pair." The viewer is treated to a sustained close-range shot of a favorite character-type in Argentine B movies—the lowlifes that inhabit the *arrabal*:

> He, grabs her from there, in the populous capital of a province, out of a slum [*de una casa de miserias*]...
> Now, always a bit husky and with swollen eyes, dressed in black and sustaining herself over stiletto heels that whisper tango like only the *arrabal* can."[99]

> Rough curls behind an exposed ear, the throat curved and sensual, the heavy fake jewelry, the tight dress giving away a buried distant life

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[98] Eisenstein, calling upon parallels between verse poetry, music, and film in creating "metric" or "rhythmic" effects, writes on the effect of conflicting images in montage: "For the idea (or sensation) of movement arises from the process of superimposing on the retained impression of the object's first position, a newly visible further position of the object…[the] degree of incongruence determines intensity of impression, and determines that tension which becomes the real element of authentic rhythm." See Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form; Essays in Film Theory*, ed. Jay Leyda, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1977), 47-49.

[99] Matthew Karush writes of the ways in which references to the *arrabal* and *conventillo* barrios became complicated signifiers for class difference in 1930s Argentina, surfacing in tango lyrics and representations of tango in Argentine film. See Matthew B. Karush, *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina, 1920-1946* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 27-42.

The rhyme scheme, with the beats falling on a repetition of words with the feminine *-a* ending, creates a rhythm mimicking the musical phrasing of a tango dance, separate from the group of line dancers [*el, sacó allá, en la capital populosa de una provincia, de una casa de miserias*]. This prosody accentuates the diverging roles of male and female dancers. The camera gives verse new possibilities—the pleasure of lingering on a close-up and observing a body in motion. Finally, this section of the poem exhibits a syntax of filmic images evoking the jewelry and clothing draped upon the body in a way that calls up for the viewer thoughts of the dancer's sordid past in "a buried distant life."

The next scene "Rejuvenated Husband" [*Marido rejuvenecido*], features an old man dancing with his "legitimate wife." The old man is a bureaucrat, or possibly an intellectual, who is out of shape "from years spent with his head inclined toward books," but the poem describes his skin and body as showing the salutary effect of time spent on the beach. The final line repeats the message that the sea has had a visible effect upon the man's body, noting "the lashing of the sea on the glands has put a lively turn in his knees and a little jump of the old machine recently oiled." Storni uses terminology in this and the following stanza to indicate we are not merely viewing the motion of bodies at play, but witnessing the machine-like effects of a biochemical reaction. This biomechanical figure of speech reiterates Storni's interest in describing parallels between the human body and technology, but also suggests what Tom Gunning describes as bodies in early twentieth-century films mimicking machines and enact "the logic of montage," thereby bringing into view "the syntax of modernity."[100]

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[100] Tom Gunning, "Chaplin and the Body of Modernity," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 8, no. 3 (2010): 240-244. Gunning cites Leger's *Ballet Mécanique* and the performance styles of Charlie Chaplin and Jean Durand as prominent and recurring instances in which "bodies in film that behave like...a machinic assembly rather than an organic whole." Gunning, 240.

The effect of images of bodies assembled out of non-human raw materials is continued in the next stanza with a description of a "niña azul" or "a blue girl," whose form is depicted with the line "the flexible ebony of the body, oxidized with salt and iodine." A verbal reversal accentuates the effect of raw materiality that crowds out the humanness of the figure: rather than a body of ebony, the girl is the ebony of a body. A strange image that seems to portray the camera lingering on either a submerged statue or an illusion emerging out of crashing waves, the girl floats with a bathing suit that is a "piece of cloud...lined with ribs made of the foam of the sea," but is nonetheless described as surrounded by her "dad, mom and little brothers."[101]

The colors of blue and oxidized ebony, the suggestions of the color of the sky, as well as a description of the "dead gold of her hair" are ultimately products of the effects of light, described in terms of the filmic effect of the subtractive formation of color, the wave of new technology that was being introduced globally in film at the time of the poem was written, and during which "Kodak pampeano" was also conceived two years prior. The poem renders this golden hair through effects of light: "This light comes from without and seems reflected like the gold of some stars." Thus, figure of the girl comes into being through poet-filmmaker Storni's technicolor imagination. Whether the girl is real or not is no longer at stake. Indeed, the imperative that might be put upon a viewer to determine the scene's relationship with whatever may be construed as the real is overtaken by the demand to tie this scene into the overall filmic logic operating within "Film marplatense," or to discern the film syntax that is being employed to relate the

[101] The end of the passage describes the ways in which the oxidization "humanizes" the clothing that wraps the girl *[humaniza la túnica envolvente*]. Thus, the question of human versus material seems to swing wildly back and forth in this passage, perhaps simulating a film viewer's perception of human form emerging from abstract imagery.

poem's parts to its whole. The exercise of this unity, over and above the force of any putative realism, is exemplified by the girl's "mystic purity." The viewer thus enters fully into a realm purely composed of the physical and chemical relationships between things, motion and light, in which all questions revolve around questions of media and mediation. In other words, in a filmic field of experience, the image of the girl exists only relationally and any image that bears a resemblance to reality is likewise revealed as composed of indexical traces of light—as an impression upon our sensory matrix relayed through technological means.

Interrupting these passages is a scene that stands out as purely filmic, in which medium and artist—or filmmaker—are simultaneously exposed:

> An unknown hand, open, is put up to a piece of glass that shows through to the sea. The hand ignores, but covers, the plane of water, the neighboring soil, and the distant headland. Meanwhile an old waltz creates an atmosphere of reverence and crinoline, the chronicler wants to seize the strange backlight of the spider with five fingers, taking over the immensity

A visualization of the many layers of experience that inhabit a film, the scene is the camera relaying both representation and traces of reality. On an aesthetic level, the scene is an abstract play with form and the optical effect of foreshortening. The appearance of the hand in front of the lens thus reflexively calls attention back to the medium and the materiality of light and darkness that is the essence of the film. Rather than construct a narrative or lay out the patterns of poetic verse, the role of the cameraperson, the chronicler, is to "seize" the light: "The chronicler wants to seize the strange backlight" (*apresar el contraluz extraño)*. For a brief moment, the viewer wonders if the world of this film is constructed in a purely aleatory fashion. This interlude is perhaps the most

direct statement of a filmic-poetry and throws subjectivity and objectivity into confusion: film offers Storni a poetics capable of recording time and space; but, at the same time, the landscape, music and personalities that appear in the film poem, though no less important, only happened to be present in the frame as the camera rolled.

The film-poem ends with a stanza with the French phrase "*Le mot de la fin,*" or "the last word," but also, perhaps, translated as "punchline"—

> Why, while the orchestra slows, do I watch the sea and think: the earth is an orange totally coated with water; its terrestrial parts stand out like peels of the very same water that sustains and feeds it...

The "I" who watches is not only present in the film as an image, but as a being who thinks. In much the same way as commentary, opinion and perspective are built into the depictions of time and space in the *crónica,* the film possesses an intelligence, specifically by way of the subjective presence that is intrinsic to its mode of representation. In other words, by presenting a final moment of whimsy and humor—either a play on philosophical reflection or a moment of nonsense—this passage returns to the bedrock of the *crónica* form. The *crónica* allowed a writer to spontaneously switched between styles and linguistic registers, between the formal and conversation and between intellectual sobriety and artistic caprice.

***La Masa Transparente*: Film, Lens, Camera, Screen and Sea and Storni's Mass Poetics of Multimedia Materialism**

Coming at the end of an onslaught of complex images and signs of distant realities, the final passage of "Film marplatense" leaves both author and reader to pause and ponder the sea. Storni had visited Mar del Plata in 1936 for a celebration of the four hundred

years of European settlement of Argentina. In more ways than one, then, the film-poem presents the ways in which the meaning of a people and place are interwoven with time. Thus, Storni experimented with the most popular technological medium of communication and entertainment to give expression to the sentiments of the masses and thereby offered readers a way of imagining the world through the connections between the material, physical, social and temporal. From Mar de Plata, Storni wrote a postcard to her friend Maruja Müller in Montevideo describing what she experienced: "There is a world of people" [*Hay un mundo de gente*].[102]

Although she spent most of her adult life in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, Storni frequently visited the seaside town of Mar del Plata. She took her life there in October 1938. The sea was where Storni chose to die and where she was entranced, as it gave her the material for poetic imagery through which to think through the contradictions between self and world entailed in modern poetic expression. Aligning at many points with the film medium as apparatus, this sea, which she describes in "Kodak" as "*la masa trasparente*," was simultaneously a place, a film, a lens, a screen and a consciousness. The sea is endlessly interchangable with all these varieties of media because it is the unsurpassed emblem and sign of the multimedia materialism that underlay Storni's poetics. Frequently invoked by Storni as a material entity that carries meaning while also exhibiting an endless capacity for infinite permutations of form and content, the sea is a figure that contains—and is coextensive with—the properties of all creative and communicative media and is thus at the very heart of poetic practice. In such a way, as a nearly limitless malleable medium, in the poet's hands the sea could also make the world

[102] Josefina Delgado, *Alfonsina Storni: una biografía esencial* (Buenos Aires: Debolsillo, 2012), 37.

take on the appearance of an orange at the end of "Film marplatense." The 1938 poem "Mar de Pantalla," is an anagram of all of the letters that make up the name of the place—Mar de Plata—so that she composed this film poem indicating the ultimate correspondence between place, name and medium. For Storni, Mar de Plata, the "sea of silver," can thus be understood as sharing an unbreakable semiotic link with the silver screen.[103]

Despite accruing a reputation as a poet of love and feminine sentiment, from the very beginning of her poetic career, Storni's writing catalyzed a turn against a poetry of inner desires. Because her interest was in creating a poetry out of an encounter with everyday life, her poetry builds on cliché and the commonplace.[104] Storni's poetry channeled and broadcast sensation and she created a poetics that smoothly moved through media as a means towards the most direct mass communication of sentiment. Her film-poems, even at their most photorealistic, are primarily composed in a register that seeks the historical rather than the personal, but are also always bound up in an encounter between these two fields of experience. Paula Rabinowitz highlights the differences between the subject in narrative cinema and the subject in documentary cinema, writing that "if classical narrative cinema constructs a subject of desire through mechanisms akin to the psychoanalytic processes of identification and refusal in its spectator, the political documentary—the documentary that seeks to intervene in history— mobilizes a subject

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[103] Mar de Plata is also a place forever associated with film in Argentine history, as it was the location of the first movie theater in the country. Much like the early nickelodeons around the world during this period, the cinema was at home in the seaside resort that drew urban masses to see numerous other spectator attractions. See Guillermo Caneto, Marcela Cassinelli, and Héctor González Bergerot, *Historia de los primeros años del cine en la Argentina: 1895-1910* (Buenos Aires: FCA, 1996), 71.

[104] Susan Sontag writes that cliché is a French term for a photographic negative. See Sontag, *On Photography*, 173. The more common use of the word cliché in modern French as "snapshot" contains this connection to the materials of photographic process but also invites interpretation of the popular appeal of Storni's poetic style in terms of her interest in Kodak's mobile camera technology.

of agency."[105] Likewise, aware of the potential for film to enthrall the viewer and recognizing a compatibility of the *crónica* and documentary form, Storni saw in the documentary an indexical modality in which poetry could take on world historical proportions. Part of this project consisted of innovating upon the *crónica*, to turn it into a form of poetry that would emulate audiovisual qualities of the film medium.

The effect of bringing a blend of filmic and photographic documentary into poetry, in the way that Storni aims at in "Film marplatense" and the two Kodak poems, was twofold. It demonstrated a renewal of poetic form through a mode of writing achieved through the play of self and world opened through imagining filmic indexicality and materiality as a basis for representation; and, also, through an integration into poetry of the myriad effects created by the mechanical and material technologies of camera, screen and projected image. The film-poem in Storni's hands could thus be made to supersede style, the pen, and movable type in creating a new proximity to the mass gestalt of modern audiovisual experience. Moreover, as the ecstatic tone of the poems on film in the 1938 book of poems *Mascarilla y Trebol* indicates, through these filmic experiments in poetry, Storni discovered an enriched view of cinema by exploring the poetic capabilities of the camera and of film, both when employed in capturing a spontaneity of light and motion, as well as in documenting traces of the everyday.

[105] Rabinowitz, "Wreckage upon wreckage: History, Documentary and the Ruins of Memory," *History and Theory* 32, no. 2 (1993): 129.

Chapter 2

Roberto Arlt: Hybrid Modernism and the Cinematic Vernacular

La Ciudad de Cine

In 1932, Roberto Arlt embarked into Argentina's interior as a travel correspondent for the newspaper *El Mundo*. Arlt traveled up the Paraná River to the border of Paraguay from the city of Rosario, which lies a short distance west of Buenos Aires. A rough and truly backwater part of the country, a few decades earlier the area attracted Horacio Quiroga, whose first published stories took inspiration from the meeting of wilderness and human settlement in the river region. The economic advances of the region along the Río Paraná had been extremely slow in comparison with Buenos Aires, which lies on the Río de la Plata delta where the Paraná meets the sea. These pieces deliberately contrast with pieces by writers who had toured Europe and the United States, as Victoria Ocampo had as an editor of the richly illustrated and ardently cosmopolitan magazine *Sur*.

Arlt's *aguafuertes*—a form of literary sketch, or chronicle (*crónica*), that he had created and had reached great popularity by the 1930s—resisted the exoticism of travel writing and aimed to document the day to day lives of the working people of the places that he visited. Arlt wrote in the first *aguafuerte* of his travels:

> There are two forms of travel. One, in navies of recreation, recognizing annoyance that social life imposes on pleasure cruises. The other, that which I choose, deliberately, coexists with the people that work on board...almost converting myself into one of them.

Arlt had no illusions about the duplicity involved in such a venture, writing in the same paragraph that he "recognized that this is impossible" but that in doing so he could also "reach some knowledge of their trade." Moreover, in a postscript to the pieces that he

published upon his return to Buenos Aires, Arlt writes that encountering spaces about which he had no inherent knowledge required a "cinematographic" way of apprehending the world: "I have been a tourist...My vision has been purely cinematographic...my interest has been purely human, and it has been arrested upon the streets, which are the only indisputable possession of the people."[106]

In such passages, Arlt reveals his contention that modernism is a way of knowing—a vernacular through which the richness of everyday experience, even of the street itself, is rediscovered and shared. Rather than conceiving of modernity through the material changes of the cityscape, or through the transformations of labor or leisure that accompany political and economic changes, Arlt presents cinema as mode of thought that places his readers within the consciousness of the traveler. The cinematographic becomes a merging of mobility, sight, and writing that produces a sensorium geared towards understanding a world that is fractured under modern capitalism. From within seeming chaos and decay, the cinematographic vision thus brings into view new forms of human relationships and reveals the deep material and psychic interconnections within the modern social order.

Arlt's voyage ended in the city of Resistencia in the Chaco Province, located about 300 kilometers from Paraguay's capital Asunción. He wrote that Resistencia was a "ciudad de cine" or a "city of cinema," asking readers: "do you all remember the cities of North American films: here is a ranch, and three steps away a bar, and in front [of that] a large store, and further away, a great building going up into the sky."[107] Arlt goes on to

[106] Arlt, "Terminó el viaje," in *El país del río: Aguafuertes y Crónicas*, eds. Cristina Iglesia and Montserrat Borgatello (Paraná: Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos, 2016), 95.
[107] Arlt "Resistencia, Ciudad del Cine," 67.

sketch out the city's spaces and the life he sees on the streets of Resistencia. He depicts the life of the city as a set of contradictions. Resistencia was a very small but growing agricultural center settled by Italian immigrants. Indicating the small size of the population, but also its technological modernity, Arlt looks into the phone book and exclaims that the town has "Eight Hundred Telephones!"[108] He notes a motley assortment of people coming from both town and countryside on the city streets, but also describes the smells from the factories and dryly touts the town's industriousness, writing blankly: "Prosperity. Prosperity."[109]

Deviating from a long line of writers in Argentine letters that sought to either affirm or reconcile the deep rifts between country and city that modern capitalism had produced in the country, Arlt instead envisions a world that had already been completely drawn within the signs of the urban. Arlt's observations constantly draw upon cinema because he sees film as a key technology within an ever-expanding process of spreading an audiovisual vernacular that has become (or will very soon become) an intermediary for all human experience. Moreover, as cinema is a cultural form spawned from urban life, Arlt imagines that cinema reproduces the city wherever it goes. In his most extended description of the power to transform the minds of great masses of people that he sees in cinema in "El cine y estos pueblitos," he writes:

> In Buenos Aires, the dreams that the film awakens dreams that can be controlled in some way…[But] the passions that the cinematograph—in total—provokes, awakens, and sharpens in these towns, create problems alongside everyday life that don't have a possibility of solution except in large cities, where the expansions of personality can escape the control of the family.[110]

[108] Arlt, 68.
[109] Arlt, 69.
[110] Arlt, "El cine y estos pueblitos," 49.

In the first place, Arlt's meditation conveys the fact that cinema gives the people of small towns a route of escape from the provinciality and repression of the social circles that they inhabit. In the process, however, Arlt indicates that the cinema creates a framework for interpreting reality that radically changes social reality anywhere that films are shown: the cinema awakens desires, feelings, "passions," and "problems" that can only be understood through direct reference within the social reality of the city. Through this evocation Arlt contends that, through cinema, the city comes to exist everywhere. Thus, Resistencia is "A City of Cinema," although the same might be said of any other small town or village that he encounters.

According to Arlt, cinema's effectiveness the forms of consciousness of urban life as a new vernacular lies in the ways in which film inhabits the modern psyche. In "El cine y estos pueblitos," Arlt describes film as a "tempting devil" that introduces the "audaciousness of cities" to remote places and as a form of culture that "reproduces the supplication of Tantalus," as it creates desires that cannot be satisfied. Further on, he records his impression of the experience of cinema within the mind: "[even] after the film passes, a passionate little arena of its images remain suspended, fixed inside the consciousness of men and women."[111] Arlt does not explore these sensations with disdain, but, as the description of his "cinematographic vision" denotes, he fully shares in them. Thus, cinema possesses an inescapable attraction but it also offers Arlt the conditions for new ways of thinking and communicating: through the modern vernacular of cinema, Arlt theorizes changes in the political economy of Argentina, as well as transformations in the psychic lives of people across the world. Cinema thus opens a

[111] Arlt, 50.

horizon for thought that is common to many of the modern technologies that fascinated Arlt. Its effects upon the minds of the masses carry great risks, which Arlt explores in depth in the course of *Los siete Locos* and *Los lanzallamas*, the two interlocking novels that are the subject of the final two sections of this chapter. Nonetheless, Arlt believed that cinema can open up new avenues for understanding how entertainment and politics converge. Cinematic sounds and images inhabit our minds and the integration of desires and dreams into social reality amplifies the capacity of this technology to endow spectators with powerful forms of vernacular knowledge through uniting experiential learning with abstract thought.

The Writer as Inventor: Mass Culture and Hybrid Modernism

Arlt saw modern life as occurring within a world that resisted representation because it had become subsumed by technologies of representation. As such, cinema is a central concern in Arlt's writings but it still exists within a network of other modern technologies and techniques that Arlt gathered together as a mode of writing capable of encompassing hypermediated experience. This hybridity in Arlt's written work reveals a compound of thematic and stylistic anomalies within his fiction, namely, a combination of complex modern forms of knowledge with the use of a written vernacular drawn from popular culture—with links to popular visual culture, in particular. To speak of Arlt's hybridity is thus to look at both the multilayered composition of his works and to understand the ways in which his use of language put the knowledge that working-class intellectuals had to offer on display for the everyday reader in 1920s and 1930s Buenos Aires.

Writing during the dissolution of Argentina's democratic government, when that government was still in its infancy, Arlt's work has been thoroughly analyzed in terms of its immediate historical context. Sylvia Saítta, for example, sees Arlt's work as a "mirror that 'reflects' the distorted and disproportionate historical, political, social and cultural circumstances of his epoch to account for a society that was unstable and in crisis."[112] Nonetheless, the social conditions and political dilemmas of Arlt's 1920s and 1930s Buenos Aires both foreground and intersect with the deepest crises that would later face twenty-first century societies around the world. As a writer evoking the dying days of a functioning government, the rise of populism, the exploitation of labor, the vast unawakened power of the lumpenproletariat and the birth of new forms of authoritarianism, Arlt stands as a provocateur for the possibilities of subversiveness of fiction at a historical moment when the difference between truth and falsity disappears in political spectacle.

Arlt is a prototype of the kind of writer from the global periphery who can yield a new understanding of modernism. A modernism explored through hybrid writers like Arlt simultaneously encompasses larger geographical areas while also addressing deeper political quandaries. He is the embodiment of many, if not all, of the qualities a type of writer emerging in the 1930s in the urban capitals of modernism outside of Europe and the United States. These cities, including Havana, Rio de Janeiro, Jakarta, Cairo and Johannesburg—but with Buenos Aires and Shanghai preeminent among them—were hothouses of hybrid modernism. The daily life of these cities was continually in dialogue with what were at the time imagined as the centers of global culture in Europe and the

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[112] Sylvia Saítta, "Vientos de conspiración en Los siete locos. Los lanzallamas," *Fragmentos: Revista de Língua e Literatura Estrangeiras* 32 (2007), 40.

United States, but cultural life within these cities was also constantly in flux as part of vibrantly real network of diverse port cities that stretched across the world. Working- and middle-class writers like Arlt flourished in these cities amid exceedingly difficult conditions for practicing socially-engaged writing as a full-time trade for the non-elite.

Ricardo Piglia has summarized the varied and disparate materials through which Arlt told his stories, and how, in the process, his fiction penetrates the social and political quandaries that underlie a distinctly modern society:

> Arlt always looked for tales in the durable forms of melodrama and the popular uses of culture (books of popular science, sexology manuals, esoteric interpretations of the bible, stories of voyages to exotic countries, the old traditions of oriental narratives, the cases of true crime). His fascination with the story passed through Hollywood cinema and through sensationalist journalism. Mass culture takes up the events and subjects them the logic of the stereotype and the scandal. Arlt converted this spectacle into the material of his texts. His stories capture the paranoid nucleus of the modern world: the impact of public fictions, the manipulation of belief, the invention of facts, the fragmentation of sensibility, the logic of conspiracy.[113]

Piglia's summarizes the way Arlt "converted the spectacle" of mass culture into fiction that probed modern sources of doubt and anxiety. He underscores the importance of the new role that working-class writers like Arlt had within societies that were becoming intensely urbanized and globalized in the first half of the twentieth century. Their concerns and preoccupations present a scene of early-twentieth-century mass culture engaged in a critique of the contemporary merging of politics, mass media and entertainment. The approaches these hybrid modernists developed reveals that literature assumed a new place of distinction in an era in which media forms were beginning to proliferate and produce alternative forms of literacy. Fragmented and amalgamate modes

[113] Ricardo Piglia, *Crítica y ficción* (Barcelona: Debolsillo, 2014), 16.

of writing linked to crime journalism and installment fiction were overtaking long-established genres of linear long-form narrative to become essential forms of socially-engaged fiction by the second half of the twentieth century and beyond.

El crimen casi perfecto: The Almost Perfect Crime or Malfunctioning Kitchen Appliance?

Arlt's bare-bones detective story "El crimen casi perfecto ("The Almost Perfect Crime"), is a short piece of fiction in which several diverse source materials come together. The compact, at times fragmentary, account of a murder investigation was written for mass publication in *Mundo Argentino,* a magazine largely catering to movie fans, featuring cover photos of film stars like Lupe Vélez, Rita Hayworth, Greer Garson, and Paulette Goddard. The magazine predominately featured sections on fashion and sports, but also included comic strips and columns on more arcane topics, such as palm reading. The article appears in a form that resembles an actual record of a real crime investigation. An "An Almost Perfect Crime" thus displays Arlt's predilection for true crime and sensationalist journalism. Moreover, not only does the magazine's film-loving readership indicate that Arlt and his publishers believed his fiction would find a home with audiences familiar with Hollywood film, the story itself contains traces of the influence of Hollywood cinema within his work.

The story ends with the declarative statement, "Fue el asesino más ingenioso que conocí" ("He was the most ingenious murderer that I ever knew").[114] This is stated by the detective-protagonist upon the death of this most ingenious of murderers. Despite the

[114] Roberto Arlt, "El crimen casi perfecto," *El crimen casi perfecto* (Buenos Aires: Clarin/Aguilar, 1994), 107. Originally published in *Mundo Argentino*, May 20, 1940.

brevity of the final line, the sentence speaks volumes about Arlt's persona. The dramatic tone conferred by the certainty of this first-person declaration speaks directly to the audience and provokes an immediate relationship with Arlt: they could trust the experience of this writer, his resourcefulness, street wisdom, background as an itinerant writer and a wanderer of Buenos Aires streets, familiar with characters from all walks of life.

Arlt's fiction and dramatic works frequently contain passages that look back to his work as a journalist to convey the gravity of a situation. A favorite example among Arlt scholars is the play *Trescientos milliones* which begins with a preface describing that the events of the play are drawn from a crime that Arlt was assigned to cover as a reporter, saying of the unusual clues that he found on the crime scene: "The sum of these simple details produced in me a profound impression. Month after month I walked around having before my eyes the spectacle of [the] poor woman."[115] In moments like these, Arlt's own experiences merge with his fictional world: his life, or at least as far as he has constructed it for his readers, becomes part of the text.

Arlt states the journalistic source of his play *Trescientos Milliones* directly, but the notes from his beat reporter days are also felt indirectly throughout his fiction in descriptions of porteño and thugs, gangsters, and con artists. "The Suicide," the penultimate chapter at the climax of Arlt's most reprinted novel, *Los siete Locos* (*The Seven Madmen*), inexplicably relates one such situation, with all of the signs of a story drawn from Arlt's reporter days. In a macabre moment that catches the reader off-guard,

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[115] Roberto Arlt, *Trescientos millones y La juerga de los polichinelas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Abril, 1982), 43.

the protagonist, Erdosain, is unexpectedly present in a cafe while another customer ingests cyanide—a favorite Arltian trope. Erdosain later sits in his booth and stares at the discoloration and bloating of the dying body. Further on, Erdosain overhears details of a grisly murder that led to the suicide from the police, the reader finds out that "Erdosain remembered the story as if he had read about it in the distant past (In fact, he had seen it in a newspaper only the morning before)." The passage goes on to describe a convoluted case of adultery and murder. In scenes like this, Arlt's blunt and pragmatic journalist persona enters the scene, not only with the detailed recounting of a news article related to the crime, but also when Erdosain is questioned by the police and he spontaneously slips into the sharp sensibility of a veteran crime reporter, pondering anomalies in the crime story and lingering on small details like: "the cuffs of the dead man's trousers were muddy; his shirt was dirty and moist."

"An Almost Perfect Crime" begins by describing a scene in which a wealthy woman alone in her locked home appears to have self-administered cyanide as she drank her whiskey nightcap while reading the paper. The woman's three sons, who stood to gain a substantial fortune, are at first cleared as suspects, because there was no evidence of murder and their actions on the night in question are accounted for. However, the narrator, whom the reader at first cannot identify, has a sudden moment of inspiration as he stops for a glass of whiskey himself at a cafe while mulling over the crime scene, whereupon he looks at the ice cubes served to him with the drink and suddenly realizes the method of transmission, implicating the older son who had earlier repaired the icemaker in the mother's home.

After detailing the crime, the suspects and the scene of the crime, the narrator is introduced indirectly in a fragment that could be easily overlooked by a reader quickly skimming to discover the tale's morbid conclusion. "Such was the technical situation of the case when I was named by my superiors to continue to take it on," the narrator notes after describing inconsistencies between the evidence on the scene and the conclusion that this was a suicide.[116] This is the only piece of identifying information that the audience is presented with regarding the narrator. There also is a plainspoken orality to such a phrase: it could also sound like an intriguing piece of conversation overheard on a crowded bus. Indeed, it might have been, as the reader can easily imagine the ever-curious Arlt eavesdropping as he made his way around the intimate spaces of the Buenos Aires cityscape. Leaving the narrator unidentified in the opening paragraphs creates a sense of another storyteller lurking behind the scenes of the narrative providing the details and guiding its logic. In other words, what the story presents the reader with is not exactly an unreliable narrator, but another variety of narrator altogether: a superficial narrator with the appearance of a palimpsest. Despite the fact that the story is told from the first-person perspective of what is indirectly implied to be a police detective, Arlt's persona is undeniably visible just beneath the surface of the story.

The movement and pacing of the story create a feeling of suspense that would have been familiar to readers of Edgar Allan Poe, and it is likely that Arlt had modeled his attempts at writing detective fiction after Poe's work. Rita Gnutzmann notes that Poe was the primary North American writer read by Arlt and that Poe was one of the few writers that Arlt "mentions expressly" when describing his favorite authors. Gnutzmann

[116] Arlt, "El crimen casi perfecto," 103.

remarks that, aside from Feodor Dostoyevsky's characters, Poe's were the most likely source of the behavior and characteristics of Arlt's own characters.[117] All the more strange then that, this narrator differs greatly from Poe's famous detective. With the very opposite of the grand introduction that Poe's Dupin receives from his narrator, Arlt's detective-narrator remains nameless and faceless. He or she never receives any description or even a proper name. Thus, the everyday reader could imagine Arlt behind this detective figure and this actually heightened the story's suspense: this tale could very well be a true account told by a writer beloved for regular newspaper columns that guided readers through the faces and places of the city.

Arlt first became well-known to the Argentine public through his regular opinion columns, called *aguafuertes,* or etchings, in the daily, *El Mundo*. He reinforced his persona as a savvy writer of the streets as his prose effortlessly recreated the grizzled patois of Buenos Aires working class in fiction that recounted misdeeds of lowlife protagonists. Throughout his fiction, the persona that Arlt first created in these columns—a gritty, cynical journalist deeply familiar with all classes and kinds of people inhabiting the streets of Buenos Aires—moves in and out of view. He thus becomes both a character in his own stories—a guide through the urban inferno—and a conduit through which readers can become immersed in the narrative.

In studies of his work, critics have noted that Arlt's detours into other media, such as popular science and newspaper articles, to captivate his audience by blurring the lines between reality and fiction.[118] However, discerning such "conventions of reality" or

[117] Rita Gnutzmann, introduction to *El juguete rabioso* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2011), 24–29.
[118] Among the critical texts available in English translation, Beatriz Sarlo has given the most extensive overview of these practices in *The Technical Imagination: Argentine Culture's Modern Dreams* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

reality effect only arrives at a superficial and partial reading of Arlt's unorthodox approach to fiction. Studied within the larger context of Arlt's fiction and dramatic work, these frequent references reveal the invention of a fictional form in which the writer becomes present in the text as a combination of editor, interlocutor and accomplice. Such a persona was essential for sharing difficult and intimate knowledge of the world with the thick-skinned and suspicious urban audience of readers in Buenos Aires. This new technique depended on the pragmatic skills of a writer experienced in a range of life experiences and deeply familiar with vernacular cultural forms. Moreover, beyond their storytelling purposes, the use of newspaper articles, tabloid stories, Hollywood cinema, as well as the other cultural forms that Piglia mentions, fit into a larger pattern of vernacularization, a hallmark of worldwide modernism, conceived beyond the confines of a Eurocentric or U.S-centered modernism.

The differences between Poe's story and "An Almost Perfect Crime" display an important aspect of the modernizing impulse of Arlt as a writer. He approached texts the same way he looked at problems that led him to design and build the devices he patented, with what Beatriz Sarlo has termed a "technical imagination."[119] Thus, in writing "An Almost Perfect Crime" he drew upon Poe's mysteries, but attempted a complete detective story in the shortest form possible. The story functions as a as a schematic or blueprint for a piece of mystery fiction: an outline for creating the effects of intrigue, suspense and sudden recognition. However, the story ultimately unsettles the conventions of the detective stories that Arlt was looking to as models for fiction. Technological details embedded in the story gives the mystery a complex of flaws and imperfections that leads

[119] See Beatriz Sarlo, *The Technical Imagination: Argentine Culture's Modern Dreams* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), esp. chapter Two, "Arlt: Technology and the City."

to a greater degree of verisimilitude. Arlt thus updates this story form for the audience that was coming to dominate Argentine society: cinema spectators accustomed to spectacles of distraction and readers attuned to the reality effect present in short lurid pieces of the popular press. As with all of his writings, within this economical space, Arlt still finds ways to communicate larger themes of social and philosophical significance.

The story begins in *media res* with the short, factual statement: "The alibi of the three brothers had been verified. They had not lied."[120] Again, to begin the story here runs against the conventions of mystery fiction at Arlt's time, conventions that had been largely established by Poe. Arlt's Uruguayan contemporary Horacio Quiroga follow Poe's narrative pattern more closely in this regard. Jorge Luis Borges and Bioy Casares with their pseudonymic creation, H. Bustos Domecq, also largely embraced Poe's model, even down to the cadence of their detective's name, while using the form to mimic and parody the genre. Following the opening to the story, Arlt's narration is immediate and succinct allowing the readers to imagine themselves in a police interrogation room, visualizing the scene and listening to the suspect's statements without any clear intermediary of a narrator. Thus, in contrast to the prolix introduction to the detective and his ingenious method of investigation in the mode of Poe, the story creates the effect like that of an opening scene to a film—such openings are the rule in silent detective and crime films of the 1920s and earlier.

We opening with a scene of action was a hallmark of crime film form: from *The Musketeers of Pig Alley,* an early D.W. Griffith film dealing with crime that Patricio Fontana speculates inspired scenes in Arlt's earliest novel, to Fritz Lang's famous

[120] Arlt, "El crimen casi perfecto," 101.

frenetic openings. Deborah Knight, drawing upon Frank Kermode, speculates that an *in media res* opening is also a hallmark of films retrospectively dubbed film noir. Knight writes that such an opening initiates a hermeneutic organization of knowledge from fragments, the distinguishing feature of the genre. In which "the detective's goal is to piece together the real story from the range of story fragments that he learns about or discovers."[121] Arlt's experiences with viewing films were contemporaneous with the earliest films of urban that became known as "noir" films. As Piglia notes, Arlt's reading omnivorous tastes also led him to indiscriminately consume all matter of lurid subject matter and he likely encountered the early fictional precursors to film noir in his perusal of "tales of true crime."[122] A fascination with crime and criminals that predominates his fiction that these kinds of stories held a particular allure for him. More important than being inspired by techniques of storytelling in these films, although he certainly was, this hermeneutic framework Arlt was most interested in and a certain pragmatic variation on it left a lasting mark on his fiction. As such, Arlt's hybrid narrative forms and mastery of the cultural vernacular were not merely aesthetic innovations. Instead, apropos of his participation in several Buenos Aires literary and intellectual circles dedicated to mass politics, he put these narrative elements of the mystery and crime films to the task of

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[121] "On Reason and Passion in *The Maltese Falcon*" *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, eds. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 209.

[122] In *Asesinos de papel: ensayos sobre narrativa policial*, Jorge Raúl Lafforgue and Jorge Rivera describe the early twentieth-century boom in crime fiction in Argentina, which began around 1915 with a flourishing of publications that blended sentimental and extraordinary tales in the magazines *La Novela semanal*, *El Cuento ilustrado*, and *La Novela universitaria* known as "popular newsstand collections" or "las populares colecciones de kiosco." By the late 1920s, Argentine mystery writers had established a burgeoning detective fiction genre or "narrativa policial." See Jorge Raúl Lafforgue and Jorge Rivera, *Asesinos de papel: ensayos sobre narrativa policial* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1996), 14-16. Among the writers mentioned by Raúl Lafforgue and Rivera—authors that gained a broad popular audience through crime fiction—are Enzo Aloisi, who also went on to write the screenplay for *Los afincaos*, a film produced by Teatro del Pueblo theater founder Leónidas Barletta, close friend and collaborator of Roberto Arlt. The film is the only Argentine-produced film for which Arlt published a complete review.

offering his audience a means of reinterpreting the fragments and clues that underpinned the modern society in which they lived.

Through this approach, Arlt promotes a kind of knowledge about the world that involves the mode of hermeneutic reasoning that Knight describes, but always with eye towards how this will be applied by his audiences in Buenos Aires. Thus, far from creating a compelling appearance of reality to be reconstructed in his own fiction, Arlt is more interested in the detective story form as a mode of maintaining ambiguous truths, sustaining the existence of partial truths and deeply looking into truths that are muddled with falsehood. As the "almost" of the title of "An Almost Perfect Crime" denotes, and as is clear for much of the story that follows, the suspense hinges on the fact that although the evidence at hand, including clues and alibis, is superficially true, appearances are nonetheless distortions of reality. Drawing on a classic locked room premise, the supposed suicide of the wealthy elderly woman takes place in a house that shows no signs of entry or exit, and all the officials in the story agree that there is no explanation other than suicide. Everything seems to be settled, but the detective is bothered by the fact that "the evidence that she was distracted reading a newspaper when the throes of death took her by surprise."[123] After he explains that the official documentation has been drawn up and that he is not required by his superiors to do anything more he is still preoccupied by one inexplicable detail: "where could one locate the bottle that contained the poison before she threw it in her drink?"[124] Besides these lapses, the detective also has a lingering suspicion about the three sons of the wealthy woman, whom he describes

[123] Arlt, "El crimen casi perfecto," 103.
[124] Arlt, 103.

as *bribónes*, based on his knowledge of their checkered life histories.[125] This is a colloquial term meaning "rascal" more generally, but with a root meaning of the phrase "taker of bribes." The anonymous detective completes his dreary daily tasks—he assumes he has done all that he has been asked and accomplished his official duties—nevertheless, he is driven to solve the crime by a personal compulsion not to be deceived. Moreover, as his suspicion of the three brothers denotes, there is a latent consciousness of the ever-present social realities of corruption and graft built into his curiosity.

At the heart of the story is a dilemma that was an essential part of daily life in Argentine culture in the early twentieth century, something that Arlt encountered time and again as a journalist and as a writer who dug into the resources that popular culture offered for fiction, namely: what is the nature of knowledge in a world saturated with deception? Beyond the complexities of daily life in a crowded, busy port city full of the usual thieves and con artists, politics in 1920s and 1930s Argentina were dominated by nationalism and nativism. Often there was no distinction in public discourse between truth and falsehood: ideas and thoughts were judged by their potential to sway a crowd, pack an audience into a cinema or sell papers. Of course, the populist, democratically-elected government of Hipólito Yrigoyen benefited from these conditions as well, but the prevalence of distortion and ambiguity at all levels of Argentine social life intensified with the coup of 1930 that installed a military government under military general José Félix Uriburu.

In *Intersecting Tango: Cultural Geographies of Buenos Aires, 1900-1930*, Adriana J. Bergero describes the stifling political climate of paranoia and suspicion that

[125] Arlt, 103.

marked the era. She relates that although Yrigoyen's democratically elected government Argentina had achieved all of the outward appearances of transparency, most formal advances towards made towards greater political freedom disappeared during the period of the coup, now called the "infamous decade," which began in 1930. In the government this was a period of rightist censorship in which nativist factions monopolized the right to speech and usurped the space for debate for their own cause. Laws were passed in which even publicly uttering phrases associated with socialist tenets was punishable by imprisonment.[126] Throughout this period, violent splinter groups of nationalists aligned with the dictatorship and supported its total grip on state power. In *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919-1945*, Federico Finchelstein recounts that nationalist groups "attacked cinemas that projected movies they judged to be offensive, and...harassed with guns and clubs both leftists and Radical Party meetings."[127] By 1937, despite the clear duplicity through which the coup and subsequent dictatorships were staged, the rightist factions had gained and authenticity had been "legitimized in the national imaginary."[128] Bergero explains that rightist factions had embraced ties with fascist regimes in Europe as a sign of their legitimacy.[129]

The philosophical viewpoint that drives the suspense of "An Almost Perfect Crime" and underlies Arlt's fiction and drama thus aims at producing an awareness of deception in a social and political context where truth and lies are closely intertwined. Arlt's fiction drew contemporary reading audiences because it offered them the promise

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[126] Adriana Bergero, *Intersecting Tango: Cultural Geographies of Buenos Aires, 1900-1930*, trans. Richard Young (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2008), 298.
[127] Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919-1945* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 75-76.
[128] Bergero, *Intersecting Tango*, 405.
[129] Bergero, 405.

of not being duped. All told, this was the form of knowledge with the highest value in a context in which the poor were constantly exploited, there was a concerted effort to keep the public ignorant and directly political statements were entirely suppressed. The kind of knowledge offered by Arlt's fiction was highly accessible to a wide range of audiences and a pleasure to acquire: for an immigrant laborer in Buenos Aires, it meant not being the rube; for the struggling working-class *porteño* or *porteña*, it was key to navigating the negotiations of daily life in the city and keeping your meager earnings; for the middle-class reader, it would mean being aware of your political context despite being surrounded by empty patriotic catchphrases.

A final detail remains embedded in this short detective story: the presence of the icemaker, the mode of delivery of the poison and thus a crucial element in the mystery's plot, opens the story to another and entirely separate interpretation that would have rewarded the most attentive and observant readers of Arlt's time. In the climax of the story, the detective's epiphany begins with his statement that he is caught off guard by his own linear chain of reasoning, but that he finally realizes that the mode of delivery of the poison was a cube of ice in the nightcap the old woman was drinking, which had then melted, leaving no trace. According to the narrator, the detective's hunch that the ice was poisoned is confirmed by the police technician, who finds a toxin in the icemaker. And indeed, as the maid of the household had witnessed, before the woman's death, the brother suspected of murder had been fixing (or pretending to fix) the icemaker in his mother's freezer. However, commercial home icemakers capable of making ice in small cubes were rare in the first decades of the twentieth century. The luxury apparatus would

have been known to Arlt in a purely speculative form, likely drawn from his reading of popular science publications of the time.

The presence of an icemaker in the woman's kitchen even confuses the detective, who initially asks the maid where the ice had been bought from, to which she responds with a description of an icemaker's function "there's a small icemaker that makes them in little cubes" ("había una heladera pequeña que lo fabricaba en pancitos"). Of course, an audience reading detective fiction in publications like *El Mundo* in the 1920s—mostly comprised of the working-class and lower middle-class readers looking for a quick and lurid tale—might only have vaguely heard of such a fabulous device and certainly would have thought of it with wonder. The fact that the woman was exorbitantly rich (rich enough to be murdered for her inheritance), would have made it plausible that this novelty was possessed by someone of this decadent class status.

However, closely following patents as an inventor at the time that he was writing the story, and especially attuned to the development unusual devices of future domestic convenience that were similar to his own inventions, Arlt himself was certainly aware of the nearly one hundred years of research and development that had gone into creating a safe and convenient icemaking device. Throughout the 1930s, in fact, there were reports of several models were even produced that released a hazardous toxic chemical byproduct, even causing fatalities. Some of the refrigerants experimented with in the freezing process even involved the use of sulfated cyanide of potassium—a chemical for which Arlt had much fondness in his stories.

As such, in the spirit of an amateur inventor and chemist, Arlt could quietly tuck in this loose end as hypothetical ambiguity that adds a layer of instability to this piece of

fiction that would escape the notice of many readers. The story ostensibly ends with the son committing suicide—humiliated at being accused and arrested—thus the results of detection are never put to the test in a trial. The strange inclusion of the icemaker leads to the possibility of an alternative ending to the story—a hidden conclusion: that the icemaker malfunctioned and was the source of the deadly poison. In this conclusion, rather than a murder or suicide, the story revolves around a human life being taken by inadequately understood technology, and the crime remains unsolved because of the misinterpretation of technology's role both by the resources of forensic science at the disposal of the law and by the supposedly inimitable genius of the detective.

The mode of delivery of the poison in the form of a machine that did not yet exist at the time that the story was published represents a narrative glitch with the potential to completely unravel the compact narrative of detection. For a reader sharing Arlt's love of popular science publications, the most compelling element of the story would derive from the conflicts surrounding use of newly invented technologies in police forensic procedures. Thus, the mention of an icemaker—what would later be adopted as an ordinary home device, widely available and seemingly mundane—opens the story up to multiple levels of signification that break up any single conclusive knowledge of a crime. Insofar as a single technological detail betrays the possible failure of the detective's mind, even as that mind becomes aligned with and reflective of an urban sensibility dominated by what Sarlo describes as a "technical imagination," the rupture of imperfection becomes the hallmark of literary craftsmanship. Rather than a carefully-designed work of storytelling art that is neatly tied up and resolved, the writer creates a

story that is “almost perfect”—rough and unfinished and distinctly different from works of modern literature that attempted narrative closure and aesthetic completeness.

As a work that demonstrates failures of modern detective logic while it also displays the incompatibility of art and technology, the flawed narrative of “Un crimen casi perfecto” suggests knowledge is fundamentally bound to deception—on several levels in the design of the narrative and within the story itself. First, on the most basic level, the detective-narrator's reasoning exhibits detection as an art: a mode of thought that putatively leads to an epiphany through which a case is ultimately solved. This being the case, the investigator must persist in a line of reasoning amidst the gross deception being orchestrated by the suspect. Additionally, the conclusions reached may be compromised by factors of uncertainty within the technologically derived forensic evidence that becomes the basis for the detective’s logic. On yet another level, the conclusions reached through the art of detection also appear as a kind of self-deception—a simplistic confidence that the crime has been solved beyond all doubt and that the suspect was in fact the culprit. Ironically, in this context the actual cause of the woman's death becomes less significant than the irresolvable paradoxes at the basis of the logic of detection. Finally, underlying the entire story is a form of radical doubt that recurs throughout Arlt’s fiction: doubt produced by a sense of the ever-present possibility of an ultimate deception of the reader by the writer and creator of the narrative. In the final instance, the only form of knowledge that may be attainable is the knowledge of being deceived by a storyteller. The storyteller is one to whom the reader trusts to give a logical account of the crime and who has then betrayed this trust by staging the entire story to reveal the impossibility of satisfying one’s need for resolution.

Knowledge and deception, as a mutually constituted, coexisting, even hybrid, notion, is a recurring theme in Arlt's fiction and it was highly important both as a pragmatic philosophical mode and a way of proceeding in everyday life for Arlt's readers in Buenos Aires of the 1930s. In a city full of unknown threats—con artists passing through the busy port city, shady businesses cashing in on dubious transactions on freely flowing commodities and populist politicians eager to take advantage of the supposed ignorance of the masses—Arlt's dialectic offers a praxis for the kind of knowledge necessary for navigating a modern city saturated with deception.

For Arlt, this made knowledge of deception the primary and most valuable role of art made for the masses. It far superseded didactic forms of fiction and theater that had heretofore dominated Argentine art circles, such as the nascent social realist aesthetic that was made famous by the Boedo group and Taller de Pueblo. Arlt was in dialogue with these artists and had even worked closely with some of them—his most intimate early intellectual relationship being with the writer Ricardo Güiraldes—but he saw with a keen eye the shortcomings of these forms when offered to the public. Instead, Arlt focused on making literature convey the one form of knowledge that would be useful to the largest number of people across a wide range of social backgrounds. Ultimately, in Arlt's work, knowledge is constituted by a deep understanding of the grossest possible deception in one's surroundings, and this is a theme that recurs throughout his fiction and drama.

The Cinematic Vernacular and Modernity in *Los siete locos*

Not surprisingly for a novel that features filmmaking as a key tactic in a quasi-anarchist revolutionary conspiracy, *Los siete locos* frequently plays with cinematic effects within

narrative construction, dialogue, and description. Not only do the broader theoretical themes and social commentary that run throughout the book, but the narrative techniques that govern the novel emulate the organization of Hollywood films. Thus, despite his deep commitment to exploring the kinds of characters and social issues of the writers he admired, or possibly because he believed their social engagements deserved a larger popular audience, Arlt's texts completely diverge from the methods of storytelling of the nineteenth-century novel.

Although Arlt's story may have the earmarks of the realist fiction writers he is known to have held in high regard, such as Gustave Flaubert and Fyodor Dostoevsky, in finding a way to tell the story of *Los siete locos* Arlt drew on Hollywood film. As with his interest in Poe, Arlt keeps the core philosophical dilemmas of doubt and anxiety that concerned him at play in the novel, but jettisons elaborate prose in favor of creating a text adapted for an audience of inveterate film spectators accustomed to the development of events and action. *Los lanzallamas* (*The Flamethrowers*), the follow-up novel that continues and deepens the more general storyline of *Los siete locos*, begins with an unconventional confessional-style preface that sheds light on the problems Arlt faced as he composed the first novel. The preface also contains a rebuke of critics who had panned the novel for its unconventional prose style. Arlt writes that for him writing the novel was a "luxury" and that in his daily life as a journalist "earning a living writing is arduous and rough."[130] He describes the fact that he had wanted to write a book with a "panoramic canvas" like those of Flaubert, but with the "sounds of the social edifice that was inevitably collapsing, it wasn't possible to think in embroidery" (*bordados,* or

[130] Roberto Arlt, "Palabras del Autor," in *Los siete locos; Los lanzallamas*, ed. Mario Goloboff (Paris: Université Paris X ALLCA XX, 2000), 285.

embroidery, carries the connotation of something fine and excellent in the Spanish original and Arlt's use of this figure of speech implies his conviction over the beauty of Flaubert's works). The novel was the very opposite of a luxury – it was a necessity, a material testament to the logic of self-preservation: literature and fiction as a new foundation for a collapsing social edifice. Literature would also have to take on a new mimetic function—an inverted relationality—gleaning from the doubleness of cinema its simultaneous ability to arrest the viewer with the virtuality of a one-to-one appearance with reality, while also being the medium of the trick, the *tromp l'oeil* without equal, to end history, the very apex of technology within which the modern human fully and freely indulges in his and her own capacity to be deceived as never before. Arlt also viewed such a representational technique to supersede realism as audiovisual material rendered into the experience of history for the masses. This double movement—a simultaneity of the real and the trick—highlights distortion and conspiracy as mass modes of thought. In *Los Siete Locos* this is conceived through meditations on the relation of cinema to life, in which cinema becomes an audiovisual basis of experiencing social relations.

While praising realism he so admired in Flaubert, yet also stepping beyond it, Arlt also mentions James Joyce in the preface. The comment on Joyce appears to be a barb meant to impugn the pedantic cosmopolitanism of his critics. However, his dismissal of Joyce also denotes that Arlt believed that revolutionary forms of writing could not merely be experimental —in order for art to communicate life art must also be mass communicated. He sums up the snobbish elitism of the literary critics who negatively reviewed his book by saying: "Joyce has not been translated to Spanish and it is now in good taste to fill one's mouth speaking of him. The day James Joyce can be found in

everyone's pockets, the society columns will invent a new idol who no one has read but a dozen of initiates."[131]

Arlt's comments on Joyce reveal that he valued being accessible to the common reader—to be within reach in "everyone's pockets." Criticized by intellectuals in his day as being "semi-literate" for writing in rough and sometimes ungrammatical ways, Arlt's prose was attuned to an audience immersed in popular visual culture. Arlt was tinkering with the literary text to make it function more like narrative cinema. Besides Piglia, recent writers on Arlt have also connected his characters, dialogue and scenarios to filmic melodrama. For example, in the most comprehensive recent analysis, Matthew Bush has written of the way that Arlt's subsequent and final novel, *Amor brujo*, deploys the mode of melodrama to its furthest the extent possible for a fiction writer. Bush also notes a doubleness in Arlt's text that goes beyond simple irony. He writes that Arlt is highly conscious of his use of melodramatic form in a novel that "at once criticizes melodramatic sentimentality and relies on the sentimental format to convey its tale."[132] Unpopular in its day, even among Arlt's devoted reading audience, *Amor Brujo* nonetheless indicates that with each of his novels, Arlt was becoming increasingly focused on probing the blurred line that separated narratives in popular commercial cinema and from the conventional narrative forms of literature.

At first glance, the narrative of *Los siete locos* seems disjointed and chaotic. However, if viewed through theories of cinematic formalism the narrative structure, the narrative of the book aligns closely with that of commercial Hollywood cinema. The

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[131] Arlt, "Palabras del Autor," 286.

[132] Matthew Bush, *Pragmatic Passions: Melodrama and Latin American Social Narrative* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2015), 126.

novel is divided into three “Chapters” or parts and, within these, the story is broken up into scenes. Thus, to draw upon the terms of the narrative theories of Russian literary formalism that have inspired formal analysis of cinematic narrative, the novel consists of a relatively linear *fabula* is described to the reader through an episodic *syuzhet*. David Bordwell has described this kind of Hollywood narrative in detail in these terms:

> Each scene displays distinct phases. First comes the exposition, which specifies the time, place, and relevant characters—their spatial positions and relevant states of mind (usually as a result of previous scenes). In the middle of the scene, characters act toward their goals...In the course of this, the classical scene continues or closes off cause-effect developments left dangling in prior scenes while also opening up new causal lines for future development. At least one line of action must be left suspended, in order to motivate the shifts to the next scene which picks up the suspended line (often via a "dialogue hook").[133]

The scenes that dominate Arlt’s novel largely proceed according to the phases that Bordwell describes in his notes on classical Hollywood narration as quoted above. Again, the story opens *in media res*: “As soon as he opened the frosted glass door to the manager’s office, Remo Erdosain wanted to turn back.” As with “An Almost Perfect Crime," such an opening initiates a hermeneutic logic in the text. Moreover, along with this opening line, the next paragraph sets the scene with what Bordwell calls an “exposition," as the narrator succinctly yet vividly details the appearance and postures of the three characters, standing in the office ready to accuse Erdosain. The actions in the rest of the scene precipitate the entire plot, with the suspended line of action—the money

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[133] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 158. In the narrative structure of *Los Siete Locos*, Arlt employs an organizational pattern closely following what David Bordwell terms “the scene of character action,” which Bordwell calls “the building block of classical Hollywood dramaturgy.” Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 158.

that Erdosain embezzled and now must pay back—leading to his crime of kidnaping and thereby becoming involved in the conspiracy.

This form of narrative organization is also present in two key sequential scenes that develop the narrative, "The Astrologer," and the "Opinions of the Melancholy Pimp." In these scenes, Erdosain begins to initiate his collaboration with the secret society from which the book takes its name. As with every part of the book in which the events of the narrative unfold, these scenes are set up in ways that match Bordwell's description of classical Hollywood patterns of syuzhet and fabula. The scenes are directly preceded by a montage-like daydream sequence that ends with Erdosain at the train station buying a train ticket to the Buenos Aires Province town of Temperley. "The Astrologer," opens with an establishing shot: "The building that the Astrologer lived in was situated in the center of a wooded orchard. The house was flat and its red-tiled roof was visible from a distance over the thick growth of wild trees."[134] The direct connection between the daydream sequence, train ticket, the scene title "The Astrologer" and the description of the home of the Astrologer is nowhere explicitly stated. Arlt has a style of storytelling that is loose and rapid, which makes it particularly apt for this kind of cinematic flow: the text never states who lives in Temperley or why Erdosain is going there, yet the reader follows the diegetic and paratextual clues to infer that Erdosain has traveled to the Astrologer's home. The chain of descriptions works much in the same way as the Kuleshov effect has been theorized as exposing a logic that changes our experience of image, sound, and narrative.[135]

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[134] Arlt, *Los siete locos; Los lanzallamas*, 33.

[135] Following Dana Polan's critique of readings that present the Kuleshov experiment as an explanatory model for the creation of meaning in cinema, I suggest that Arlt's novel employs this chain of juxtapositions to exhibit the power of cinematic montage within a text—the capacity of cinematic

Next, Erdosain approaches the house, where he encounters the mysterious figure of the Astrologer framed by the door: "When Erdosain stopped to call out from the foot of the steps, the giant figure of the Astrologer soon appeared in the doorway, dressed in a yellow labcoat with his hat tilted forward over his brow so that his broad, flat face was in shadow."[136] After this dramatic opening, rendered in descriptions of light and shadow, the Astrologer brings Erdosain into the house to introduce him to Haffner, also known as The Melancholy Pimp; and the reader first learns of the conspiracy the two are devising. The suspended line of action regarding the money embezzled from Erdosain's employer is picked up in the scene, as well, when The Melancholy Pimp abruptly offers Erdosain a check after hearing of it.

Following the classical Hollywood pattern that Bordwell describes, the next scene, "Opinions of the Melancholy Pimp," begins by picking up a suspended line of dialogue from the last scene. As Erdosain is about to depart from the Astrologer's home at the end of "The Astrologer," The Melancholy Pimp says to him "I'll go with you" and their conversation continues just as the next scene, "Opinions of the Melancholy Pimp" opens: "After they turned the street corner outside the house, Erdosain said: 'I don't know how to thank you for the huge favor you've done for me! Why did you give me the money like that?'"[137] Thus begins a closer association between the two men, and Haffner tells Erdosain about some of the famous exploits that earned him his strange nickname. Haffner tells Erdosain he wants no part in the conspiracy that the Astrologer

technique to alter the reader's encounter with a text: "not that audiences find their own situation in film but that film can create its own situation, turn itself into an independent and advanced force." See Dana Polan, "The 'Kuleshov effect' effect" in *Iris* 4, no. 1 (1986): 104.

[136] Arlt, *Los siete locos; Los lanzallamas*, 34.

[137] Arlt, 44.

is describing, although the reader has already picked up clues in the previous scene that the Astrologer has advised Haffner to talk to Erdosain along these lines. Haffner's apparent resistance to being part of the group may have been designed to increase Erdosain's passion for his plans. In the dialogue between the two, the reader is witnessing "characters act toward their goals," while also opening "causal lines" for future development, in Bordwell's words.

Using Bordwell's neoformalist approach as a guide, I propose that rather than merely diverging from the conventions of literary storytelling in Argentine fiction of the time, these texts offered a kind of storytelling that was an extension of the experience of film spectatorship for a reading audience that frequented the cinema.

In discussing the global circulation of modernism through cinema, Miriam Hansen is highly critical of some of the weaker aspects of Bordwell's neoformalist theories, especially insofar as Bordwell often conflates the psychological processes of film viewing with historical foundations of film form.[138] Bordwell's articulation of the similarities of narrative structure across genres, studios, and time periods nonetheless constitutes a starting point for her notion of "vernacular modernism." Through it, Hansen complicates what might otherwise be considered a simplistic force of globalization at work in Hollywood film production and reception in the first half of the twentieth century. She writes that Hollywood cinema "globalized a particular historical experience," but she also affirms the imperative of addressing regional and local reception by stating that "films, along with other mass cultural exports, were consumed in

[138] Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 65-66.

locally quite specific, and unequally developed, contexts and conditions of reception."[139] This concept of a global vernacular is thus premised on an irresolvable incommensurability. Although he engages in repurposing Hollywood forms within the context of a larger project of revolutionizing mass culture, the creation of a cinematic vernacular within Arlt's writings is fundamentally a process of deploying film narrative technique to engage the reader's experience of space and time and thus matches more closely with Néstor García Canclini's assertion of a multitemporal hybridity or "multitemporal heterogeneity" in Latin American modernity.[140]

Arlt actively anticipates and dismisses discourses on the global nature of modernity and modernization within the novel. A fixation on such an idea fuels Erdosain's disturbingly triumphant daydreaming about the revolution he envisions at the end of the *Los siete locos*:

> He would invent the Death Ray, a sinister purple beam [with] millions of volts of power...The ray would blow up cities, sterilize the countryside, convert people and forests to ash...An aristocracy of cynics, bandits as skeptical as they were civilized, would seize power, with him at their head. And since to be happy all men need to base their hope on a metaphysical lie, they would strengthen the clergy, and set up an inquisition to undermine any heresy that might threaten the foundations of dogma or unity of faith that would be the basis for human happiness...All science will be magic. Doctors will travel around disguised as angels, and when mankind multiplies too much, its crimes will be punished by glowing dragons flying through the air dropping microbes of Asiatic cholera.[141]

Transforming Mass Desire through Cinema

Although the fabula of *Los siete locos* is predominantly governed by a syuzhet that employs the storytelling techniques of Hollywood cinema, short montage sequences that

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[139] Hansen, 68.
[140] Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 47.
[141] Arlt, *Los siete locos; Los lanzallamas*, 273-274.

create pauses to reinforce the continuing events of the narration are also scattered throughout the novel. These sequences follow an entirely different logic than the scenes that develop the narrative and they present moments of reflection undergone by Erdosain and several other of the seven members of the conspiracy. As if pieced together in the cutting room, narrative or montage chapters fall clearly into one type or the other and rarely not combine both forms (i.e., there is never a chapter in which Erdosain or the others are dreaming, fantasizing, reflecting, or obsessing, in which there is also a moment in which the events of the fabula is substantially moved forward). This way of devising a narrative and developing characters is in stark contrast to Dostoevsky, to return to the primary figure among Arlt's attested intellectual influences, within whose texts moments of thought and reflection merge with the action of the story. Although similarities have been noted with Dostoevsky's tormented young protagonist in *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov is emblematic of a very different storytelling style, in which action and psychological state unfold with simultaneity to allow the reader direct access to psyche of the protagonist. Again, following the logic of Hollywood cinema, Arlt compartmentalizes the two different modes of narrative, keeping vertiginous interiority walled off from the feverish development of the events of the narrative.

If Arlt devotedly draws from the techniques of cinema to tell his story, the reflective montage intervals of the novel are nonetheless carried out as a simultaneous social critique of the pervasive influence of film upon culture. As if conscious of literature's desperate need to reinvent itself in the mode of cinema at a moment when audiences were turning toward audiovisual entertainment, but also unable to avoid the incredible encroaching power of film to destabilize the literary medium, cinematic

sensory effects become a frequently revisited motif throughout these sections of the text. Indeed, in his newspaper columns, Arlt often very bluntly states his views on the relationship between cinema and society. In one column in *El Mundo*, Arlt wrote a sardonic commentary to his urban audience on the effect of the cinema on the people in the countryside: "The cinema is accomplishing a revolutionary task in those backward little towns, where a bookseller would die of hunger. On the other hand, there is little money to buy books and reading requires a refined imagination, unnecessary before the cinematographic spectacle."[142] Adding an undercurrent throughout the story of a fermenting violent populist revolution in *Los siete locos*, the montage scenes sustain a thoroughgoing meditation on the way cinema could help to realize the devastating projects of exploitation and mass murder that his characters imagine.

In one montage scene that introduces this as a central theme of the book, Erdosain ruminates on the crime of killing and kidnapping Barsut, his brother-in-law. Erdosain is increasingly neurotic about his own weakness and powerlessness during his musings in this scene. He is tormented by his wife as she engages in adultery, bullied by his employer, and he thinks to himself that "it is only thanks to crime that I can affirm my existence, just as it is only evil which affirms man's presence on earth." This act, he thinks, will bring substance to his existence. He sees it as a decisive moment that will bring him into a new state of being: "Among the thousands of anonymous Erdosains who infect this world, I would be the other, authentic Erdosain." At the end of a passage of circular thoughts on what he will become after he commits the crime, he analyzes the

[142] Arlt, "El cine y estos pueblitos," 49.

type of person that he is as the book begins. Lost in his world of thought, He sees himself as one among these "thousands of anonymous Erdosains."[143]

This strange self-condemnation serves as the beginning of a statement—or, as the text itself has it, a "new theory"—on the potential for cinema to deeply change the bodily and sensory experience of deepest feelings of self and action in modernity. Erdosain contemplates the act of committing the crime in the abstract and thinks:

> The words give me no feeling of a crime in the same way that a telegram of a catastrophe in China give me no sensation of catastrophe. It is as if it were not me that was thinking of the murder, but another. Someone else who like me would be a man who was flat, a shadow of a man, like in the cinema. He has a silhouette, he moves, he seems to exist, to suffer, and yet he is nothing more than a shadow. He has no life. I swear to God, all this makes sense. So, what would this shadow man do? The shadow man would be aware of what had happened but he would be unable to feel its weight, because he had no volume to absorb it into. He is only a shadow. And I too see what's happened, but can't absorb it. This must be a new theory. I wonder what a criminal court judge would say if he knew of this[144]

Despite the fact that at first glance such a cinematic "shadow man" would lack true being or presence, the passage reveals that this fantasy provides a way for Erdosain to imagine himself out of his powerlessness. Aspiring to live like "a shadow of a man, like in the cinema" paradoxically turns radical non-corporeality into a kind of power and freedom. Erdosain believes that this state of being will bring him the authenticity he seeks. As such, the "shadows" of the cinema actually function in the novel as a way of conceptualizing new reality in which mass desires can be transformed into revolutionary acts without the ostensible weakness that the individual body might entail for the downtrodden and oppressed.

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[143] Arlt, *Los siete locos; Los lanzallamas*, 87.
[144] Arlt, 86.

The passage posits a form of existence that is "all surface," in which humans themselves have come to take on the qualities of the screen images that they watch and thereby would not feel "the weight" of their decisions or "absorb" the effects of their actions.[145] In coupling his existence with this shadow man, Erdosain achieves inculpability through incorporeality. He finds a state of existence through which he can express his desires and fantasies, but within which these phases of consciousness are no longer linked to any material or bodily form of selfhood. From here, it is only a short step to bring these into reality as a crime and thereby attain the power that he lacks. Obviously, morality is troublingly absent from this formulation; but, in the tradition of anarchist thinkers that inspired Arlt, both novels experiment with the idea of a moral vacuum in order to imagine the circumstances in which the lumpenproletariat might try to seize governance of a country. For Arlt, it is clear that the public's frequent engagement with the cinema is a key precondition for this kind of radical social upheaval.

Moral ambiguity is intrinsic to Arlt's novels, and thus the question is not whether or not Arlt himself supports or rejects the deeper social reality he envisions, but rather what he imagines the contours of that reality are, and whether or not this kind of social existence is an inevitability in a future dominated by popular visual culture. As such, the above passage succinctly captures an underlying theme of the novel: that Hollywood taught Erdosain how to be both criminal and revolutionary. As the culmination of mass culture, cinema has created a new set of ideological and psychological possibilities through which the modern human can think, feel, "suffer" and exist in a new way. The stage is set for this "theory" to be put into practice from very early on in the text.

[145] Arlt, 86.

Erdosain's first gloomy thoughts about the despair he is feeling in the second scene of the book coincide with the frequent daydreams that cinema induces in his character throughout the book. Subsequent to the accusations he receives from his employer, Erdosain reflects on his present dilemma:

> 'What am I doing with my life?' he would ask himself, trying with that question to shed light on the origins of this anxiety which led him to long for an existence where the next day would not be merely time measured out in a repetition of today, but something different and totally unexpected like in the plots of North American films, where yesterday's tramp becomes today's secret society boss and the gold-digging secretary turns out to be a multimillionaire in disguise.[146]

In this passage, part of a scene with the title, "Estados de conciencia" ("States of Consciousness"), that marks this section as part of the longer chain of speculations on interiority and psychology, Erdosain uses film as a counterfactual to try to imagine his way out of his existential crisis. The invocation of "North American films" speaks once again to the way that "Americanism," as described by Hansen, was embedded in a cinematic vernacular that had become a primary way of articulating and negotiating the difficulties of everyday life. Tied to both Arlt's development of a cinematic vernacular for literary texts and also to the deeper effects of film on the individual psyche that Arlt will go on to fully explore, Erdosain's musings here initiate the theme of cinema's transformative effect on mass desire in the text.

In 1936, almost a decade after *Los siete locos* and *Las lanzallamas* were published, Arlt compiled his thoughts on cinema in "Notas sobre el cinematógrafo," a critical commentary in which he reflected on travels to Africa and the globalized phenomenon of cinema. In this piece, Arlt wrote again of shadows or "sombras" in terms that mirror Erdosain's sentiments: "Desde la butaca, cada espectador vive en su

[146] Arlt, 10-11.

sensibilidad un trozo de existencia de los personajes de sombra que gozan o sufren ante él" ("From their seat, every spectator lives through the sensation of a piece of existence of those characters of shadow that enjoy or suffer in front of them").[147] In Arlt's view, the spectator is able to grasp a piece or chunk of existence through these feeling shadows—his poetic use of word "trozo" conjures images of roughly pulling off a piece of bread. A brief and momentary shred of existence, to be sure, but the passage hints at the power that Arlt associated with these cinematic "shadows." As with Erdosain's fantasy of turning his desires into reality through a seemingly empty shadow man of the cinema, Arlt uses the term in opposition to the common associations of shadow with something partial, fleeting or illusory. Arlt's reassertion of the power of these cinematic shadows at this late moment in his life, after he had traveled for writing assignments across the world and abandoned writing novels for theater and short fictions, shows his lasting conviction regarding the twofold significance of film in modern human life in *Los siete locos*: a declaration of cinema's central role in the modern perception of reality for the urban working masses and a statement that this initiates a new reality in which the life of the unconscious comes to supersede both physical bodies and conscious thought.

As Patricio Fontana has noted in other instances, the sociological eye that Arlt brought to his writings on cinema intersect and overlap with observations on cinema and culture in the writings of Siegfried Kracauer. For example, compare Arlt's description of the audience's engagement with screen images in Arlt's "Notas" essay with Kracauer's observation in the essay "Film 1928":

> Our social reality is evaporated, petrified and distorted in a manner that is sometimes idiotically harmless and sometimes pernicious. The very things that

[147] Roberto Arlt, *Notas sobre el cinematógrafo*, ed. Jorge Rivera (Buenos Aires: Simurg, 1997), 19.

> should be projected onto the screen have been wiped away, and its surface has been filled with images that cheat us of existence.[148]

Both Arlt and Kracauer describe the experience of cinema in ways that relate images directly to existence, yet Arlt's fervor for the existence that cinema offers the spectator clearly contrasts with Kracauer's skepticism on the matter. Precisely where Kracauer finds deceptive and empty images on the screen, Arlt finds redemption. In Arlt's worldview, modern people already find themselves living a monotonous, nameless and anonymous existence and the urban masses have their only chance at grabbing intense sensory experience of existence from the shadows on the screen.

Of course, Kracauer was highly ambivalent about the social effect of the mass consumption of culture. A passage from the earlier Kracauer essay "The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies" channels what Arlt conveys in the montage chapter sequence in *Los siete locos*, in which the text moves from meditations on cinema and the mind to reflections on being and then, finally, on to the full activation and realization of the unconscious mind. Kracauer writes: "Stupid and unreal film fantasies are the daydreams of society, in which its actual reality comes to the fore and its otherwise repressed wishes take form."[149]

Erdosain's initial "longing" for a different kind of existence that is closer to the world of film in "Estados de consciencia" occurs in the first of a series of intercalary chapters that act as montage sequences break the book's narrative flow. These chapters form a speculative backbone in the novel that guides the reader through the interior life of

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[148] Siegfried Kracauer, "Film 1928," *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 308

[149] Siegfried Kracauer, "The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies," *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 292.

Erdosain and other characters as it transforms during their conspiracy. In this sequence of scenes, meditations on cinema and ontology are brought to bear upon nascent psychoanalytic understandings of consciousness. Beginning with "States of Mind," the text continues through scenes with fantasies of different states of existence in which the boundaries between outward reality and inward experience are explored. These scenes move from Erdosain's initial probing of the mind through a reflection on existence in the scene entitled "'To Be' through a Crime" ("'Ser' a traves un crimen"), to an eventual culmination, in a complete break through into representations of the vast space of the subconscious in the chapter "Sensation of the Subconscious" ("Sensación de lo subconsciente."). These breaks in the narrative create an alternate metanarrative space in which film has brought the subconscious into full presence in the daily life.

The scene that culminates the montage sequence in *Los siete locos*, "Sensation of the Subconscious," begins by abruptly focusing on the Astrologer sitting alone in his home. The scene begins an extended encounter with the inner life of the Astrologer, Erdosain's accomplice and de facto leader of the group of conspirators. This mystic-like figure, a combination of magician and charlatan, hearkens back to the underground world of the urban occult in Arlt's first published essay "Las ciencias ocultas en la ciudad de Buenos Aires." In the montage scene in *Los siete Locos*, the reader finds the Astrologer "ensimismado," literally in-one's-own-self, meaning lost in thought or daydreaming. The temporality of the narrative quickly begins to unravel as the subconscious of the Astrologer grows to envelope the whole text. Envisioning the description of this winding, circular or concentric temporality requires some conceptual acrobatics on the part of the reader:

> As the moment for the crime drew near, he felt another special sense of time growing within the space of normal time. So he felt he existed in both of these times. One was that of the normal states of life, the other was fleeting but heavy, part of his heartbeats, slipping through his fingers locked in meditation like water out of a reed basket.[150]

Embodied and material, yet ephemeral and slipping away, this evocation of the subconscious mind entering into the space of lived reality suggests a dissolution of the divide between the conscious and subconscious.

This meeting of the worlds of consciousness and the subconscious is presented as a difference in temporality, as a slippage between "normal time" and "special time." The passage continues in the next paragraph: "So the Astrologer, held within clock time, felt another time rapidly slipping through his brain like a cinema film slipping vertiginously spools out its images."[151] Although the temporality of the subconscious surfacing in these passages is felt by the Astrologer in terms of malfunctioning cinema apparatus, this is nonetheless part of the everyday reality of cinema considered as a whole in Arlt's time. That is to say, a film reel slipping during an exhibition would have been very much part of the entirety of the film-going experience in the 1920s. As was seen in the previous sections describing the potential for the shadows of cinema to become part of everyday reality, this passage shows that the powerful presence of the subconscious emerging in conscious life has a direct corollary for Arlt in the spectator's experience of film.

The temporal logic of the cinema eventually grows to take over the entire chapter, as the "special time" associated with the unspooling cinema, film now fills the Astrologer's entire awareness:

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[150] Arlt, *Los siete locos; Los lanzallamas*, 242.
[151] Arlt, 242.

> before he could clearly grasp an idea it had vanished and had been replaced by another...he had thought those mechanical minutes, sped up by his anxiety, had been so long they were immeasurable...This feeling kept him on the lookout in the dark. He understood that any mistake he made in his current state could be fatal to him later on...He felt that the person sitting there in the dark was not him, but his double, someone forged by emotion to his exact same appearance, with the same rhomboidal face, folded arms, and hat down over his eyes. But he found himself unable to fathom the thoughts of this double so intimately linked to himself, yet so distant from his understanding…At these moments he a feeling of existence more strongly than the existence of his body.[152]

Much in the way Erdosain feels that the "normal time" of everyday life is "merely time measured out in a repetition of today," here again the temporality associated with both the subconscious and the cinema is felt as "immeasurable." The text's uncanny evocation of a doubled self, "forged by emotion to his exact same appearance," yet impenetrable to the individual's conscious mind, emerges from a sensation of the subconscious immersed in undifferentiated time that can only be articulated in terms of the experience of cinema.

In this state, in which consciousness merges with unconsciousness, the Astrologer thinks to himself that this dissociation of self is result of the "certainty of the impending crime." He describes the experience of the doubling of his being in temporal terms: "his physical being was part of mechanical, clock time, while his double was located in the slow speed of this other time that no clock could control."[153] One could read this passage with an eye towards the Freudian explanation of a double representing the return of childhood narcissism, occurring, as Freud writes in "The Uncanny," as an "insurance against the destruction of the ego."[154] However, rather than "self-observation" or "self-criticism" that Freud ascribes to it, this "double" assumes a power over the Astrologer,

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[152] Arlt, 243.
[153] Arlt, 243.
[154] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *Writings on Art and Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 210.

rendering him "unable to move, stuck in the mechanical measure of time while...prey to another time I have no control over."[155] Instead of being a manifestation of the ego that takes on an uncanny appearance of otherness, for the Astrologer, the double and the temporality associated with it possess a radical alterity, presented as a fusion of cinematic time and the unconscious mind.

The effect intensifies and the Astrologer becomes swallowed up by this "special" temporality. The reader witnesses this moment amidst a play of cinematic images:

> The room was shot through with arrows of moving shadow. Scarcely a minute had gone by. His thoughts were simultaneous, and swept together in this absence of time, facts which, if they had not taken place in real time, would have needed months, if not years, to become apparent. So, he had been born forty-three years and seven days earlier, but this past was constantly being swallowed up by the present, which itself was so fleeting that it was the Astrologer of the next minute who was being consumed in the instant.[156]

The world surrounding the Astrologer takes on the qualities of a projected moving picture, as the temporality of everyday reality—the narrative flow of the Astrologer's life, past and future, within the text—is subsumed within the unreeling of an ever-expanding present. The indexical signs pointing to a past that was part of a linear temporality, including the very moment of biological birth, become part of an indeterminate and infinite present. The force of this continuous present is so strong that even "the Astrologer of the next minute" is pulled into its current. In this way, just as the single images that compose a film are altered as they drawn into the new temporality of the momentary flow of a projected film, the Astrologer's unconscious expands to encompass the entire text. As such, insofar as the Astrologer's past and future exist entirely within

[155] Arlt, *Los siete locos; Los lanzallamas*, 263.
[156] Arlt, 244.

the narrative space of the two novels, the text itself quite literally collapses into the evocation of cinematic unconscious in this passage.

In Arlt's text, the past and future momentarily disappear into an all-consuming instant that finds its only representation through the imagery of cinema, yet perhaps the cinema in this passage and others in the novel is not being employed as a representation *per se*. That is to say, for Arlt, perhaps this is not a scene of the unconscious being conveyed by recourse of analogies with cinema. Instead, the fusion of descriptions of the states of mind and being in the text, the experience of cinema for a spectator and the experience of the unconscious as it emerges, however briefly in waking life, reveals that Arlt is positing that the unconscious and the cinema are one and the same, after all.

Through his exploration of the recesses of a character's unconscious mind, Arlt thus offers an understanding of the unconscious as intrinsically cinematic. In a sense, this culmination of the sequence of these intercalary montage chapters functions as Arlt's singular artistic statement on the modern novel. By way of scenes that redraw the dimensions of the novel form to include elements of the newer, excitingly modern technological medium of film, Arlt is making a statement that positions him as potentially the most provocative modernist fiction writer of his day. As Arlt's North American contemporaries, such as John Dos Passos (who some believe Arlt had read) and James Joyce (who Arlt was aware of but had not read), were simultaneously exploring in not altogether different ways, the novel of the 1920s and 1930s was becoming a powerful literary medium for portraying the world of the unconscious, Arlt was determined that this literary medium must draw from the cinema as it attempted to fully present the realities of the unconscious experience.

Arlt, always guided by his instinct as an inventor, ties the very mechanism of the film apparatus (in the case of the Astrologer's unconscious, that of the film reel and projector), as well of cinema as a cultural institution, to the palpable fragmentation of consciousness in modernity. In this way, these passages show Arlt's contention that humans make film in their own image and that our fascination with film's representations of reality is not merely related to entertainment or distraction, but that the abiding attraction to cinema arises as humans in modernity face their own awesome ignorance of the numerous layers of conscious and unconscious reality experienced in in everyday life. In other words, for Arlt, people are attracted to cinema for the same reason that they are possessed with the mystery of an existence split between many states of consciousness and physical being. In Arlt's fiction, depictions of cinema unite these fragments of the past and visions of the future into one stable and continuous instant and, in doing so, allow all reality to be subsumed into one unconscious experience—that of the enthralled spectator, dreamlike, consuming the rapid flow of light and shadow. In this time period, perhaps only Walter Benjamin came close to articulating the insight that Arlt is adumbrating through his lumpenproletariat revolutionaries when he famously wrote: "the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses."[157]

In its use of cinematic imagery and effects to render the complex mental states of its characters, form follows function in *Los siete locos*; the narrative unfolds in a way that attests to the embeddedness of the cinema in the modern consciousness. For Arlt, political revolution has a tripartite genesis: a society in which mass culture, cinema and

[157] "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn; ed. & intro. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 237.

the unconscious mind are inextricably bound together as the basis for all social life. Moreover, individuals are effective as revolutionaries insofar as they are also audiences of and experts on the cinema. In Arlt's fiction, modern political and social power is predicated on mastery of the mode of entertainment—or distraction, as Kracauer has it—that attracts the masses.

Mass Deception and Mass Destruction

From within his cinematic trance in "Sensation of the Subconscious," the Astrologer enters into frenzied reflection about his role as "the driving force for great events." Finally, he envisions the steps to be taken to begin the revolution that the group is planning. Fittingly for a technology that brings the power of the unconscious of the masses into reality, he puts a particular emphasis on the cinema as a key feature of the modern revolution, a crowning technology among other nefarious machines of destruction:

> Important: set up gas factories. Get the chemicals. For the cells, trucks in place of cars. Solid tires. Training camp in the mountains…Also, factory on the banks of the River Paraná. Cars with nickel steel armor plating. Asphyxiating gases important. Revolution breaks out in the Chaco and in mountains. Where brothels were running, kill the owners. Gang of murderers in airplanes. Everything is feasible...Also a school of revolutionary propaganda. Cinema important element. Note: see filmmaker. Erdosain can study it. Filmmaker dedicated to revolutionary propaganda. That's it...Now the rhythm of his thoughts slowed themselves down.[158]

"That's it," the Astrologer declares with an imputation of finality as to the crucial part that of film will play in his plan. At this moment, as if reaching the correct conclusion that film must be the key ingredient, the frenzied and uncontrolled pace of his thought—

[158] Arlt, *Los siete locos; Los lanzallamas*, 251.

itself an unspooling of film—finally slows. At this point, the narrative does not return to a description of his thoughts, but to the "interior of his skull" ("el interior de su craneo") where images of metal and fire flash in the darkness. Such is the Arltian reality that the Astrologer inhabits, in which the human and technological merge. Here, as elsewhere in Arlt's texts, the reader encounters a strikingly modern conception of the intrinsic interconnectedness of the human and technological. However, the image also recalls the scene of Plato's cave and shows the origins of this relation to be ancient. Ulimately, Arlt's vision of cinema technology anticipates the use of film as propaganda in World War II but also reflects back upon the chemical warfare of the First World War. In this context it is no surprise that he understood that the seemingly innocuous pleasures of film—and the immersive cinematic visual culture that he saw emerging around him—could also be drawn upon as a catalyst for chaos and violence.

Arlt's social critique is neither utopian, nor visionary: it stems from a member of the proletariat speaking on behalf of the proletariat and to the working and middle classes. Arlt's criticism of leftist intellectuals during his lifetime reiterates this position. When rebuffed for an opinion article in the pages of a leftist journal in which he put forward his theories of cinema and socialism in Argentina, he responded that the writer who was critical of him did not really understand the people for whom he was theorizing revolution: "Of one hundred proletariat...90 don't know who Karl Marx is...but 90 can tell you the way that Rudolph Valentino kisses and what mustache José Mogica wears."[159] Unlike the Argentine leftist thinkers with whom he engaged in debate, Arlt

[159] Qtd. in Sylvia Saítta, "Entre la cultura y la política: los escritores de izquierda," *Crisis económica, avance del estado e incertidumbre política, 1930-1943*, ed. Alejandro Cattaruzza (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2001), 405.

does not try to reach a conceptual understanding of cinema as a medium for social realist expression. Instead, as with his detective fiction, the subversive aspects of his novels cut deeper than speculative debates on the value of art to society or on the uses of realism to undercut an elite "l'art pour l'art" aesthetic.

Arlt thus creates a literary vernacular out of the collective fantasies that cinema induces in audiences and renders social realities into this vernacular. Ultimately, Arlt's subversiveness—and the source of the continuing attractiveness of his texts to readers and critics alike—consists of a sensibility about everyday life: if it has any direct political aims these are directed towards the pragmatic, as with the applied hermeneutics that his detective fiction pieces offer a general audience. The paranoid moments of each text offer the reader knowledge about sources of radical deception in the world. In the depictions of a revolutionary imaginings taken to extremes that give *Los siete locos* and *Las lanzallamas* their tone of dread, the lumpenproletariat engages in a parasitic mass deception even upon members of its own class. Arlt's novel was written at a time when the communist revolutions that had inspired bright notions of the possibility of worldwide liberation for workers and the exploited had already begun to fade from view with the rise of Stalinism and increasing factionalism within communist parties worldwide. His fiction demands a more sophisticated understanding of revolutionary consciousness of its middle- and working-class readership. In it, readers fall under a dystopian shadow that demands more than romantic dreams of total social change. Despite his commitment to a political vision drawing from anarchism, populism, and socialism, Arlt asks a difficult question of himself and his readers: perhaps a new world order will someday be

conceived among the wretched of the earth, but what will stop them from being so thoroughly committed to their own cause that they will even deceive themselves?

Chapter 3

The Proletariat's Cookbook: Art and Technology as Worker's Praxis in Mao Dun's Writings on Mass Culture and Film

Figure 3.1 Mao Dun (center, in smoky quartz sunglasses) posing with friends Yun Daiying and Zhang Tinghao in front of a film theater in Guangzhou, 1926.[160]

"After our autonomy was lost, we were divided; division leads to revolution...Doubtless, we have experienced more than thirty years of revolution, and the consciousness of our people has greatly advanced...I am not saying that revolution cannot be at all successful...but can a spirit of the people form?"

Jiang Tingfu, *Zhongguo Jindaishi Dagang*, 1939

"In the entity of the multitude the little Is are joined and become the big I"

Mao Dun, "A New Task for Writers," 1925

[160] Image source: Mao Dun *Quanji*, Vol. 15.

"Now that there is finally emerging in Chinese film a boundlessness of 'great material', and to the many illiterate people of China, film is a much-needed educational tool, however, the great invention of Lumière has not yet been pursued far enough by us!"

Mao Dun, "Forty Years in the Invention of Film," 1936

Culture without Revolution: Defining a People through the Pungent Flavors of Mass Culture

Chinese literary critic Lan Dazhi has written of Mao Dun's earliest fiction collection—the trilogy *Eclipse* (1928)—to explain how the author's fascination with revolution freed his writing from discourses on history:

> A historian of revolutions must properly narrate the affairs of history strictly according to revolutionary ideology/ideas, but an author who writes about revolutions is freely permitted to describe the personal experiences and impressions of a literary work in a [portrayal of] historical processes. This permits him to unconsciously permeate the [character's] confusion and doubts—it permits an entirely different voice to emerge[161]

Prior to what would become a lifelong commitment to realism as a mode of cultural production, the *Eclipse* trilogy rendered the emotional effects of revolution through experiments inspired by realist literary forms that were largely already established by European writers in the first half of the twentieth century. As Lan describes, Mao Dun's work predominantly featured a blend of realism with naturalistic techniques that conveyed "personal experiences and impressions," with which Mao Dun explored the theme of revolution through depictions of interiority.

The theme of revolution was close to the writer's heart: Mao Dun was at the height of his political activism in 1927. In that year, he joined myriad leftist intellectuals

[161] Lan Dazhi, *Xiandai Wenxue Jingdian: Zhenghoushi Fenci* (Beijing: Qinghua University Press, 1998), 25.

in a collective fever dream of one event that would catalyze the communist revolution. This was an event that—in retrospect—came to be known as "The Big Revolution" or "大革命." This was the expected culmination of internal politcal conflict that came at the conclusion of the period of cooperation between the Nationalists and the Communists fighting warlord militias. Leftists believed that after this revolution, Communists would establish a stable faction within the national government and would eventually unify the country as one socialist whole. Mao Dun's fervor would soon end in disappointment as the 1927 alliance between the two major parties instead ended in Nationalist domination—the Chinese Communist Party retreating underground—as well as to the series of purges known in English as the "The Shanghai Massacre" and in Chinese as the "April 12th Incident" (四一二事件). Mao Dun became a fugitive from the Nationalist government and went into exile at this point.[162]

In a well-known appraisal of Lu Xun, Mao Zedong wrote that "Lu Xun was the major leader in the Chinese cultural revolution;" that Lu Xun was "a great thinker and a great revolutionist."[163] American literary critics such as Leo Ou-fan Lee have made a strong case for unsettling this viewpoint, but there is little doubt that Lu Xun will long remain enshrined in the official discourse of the Communist Party of China as the writer embodying the spirit of the Chinese communist revolution.[164] If Lu Xun represents one

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[162]Citing Chen Yu-shih, Marston Anderson regards the repeated motif of doomed triangular love affairs in Mao Dun's fiction as an allusion to the failed alliances of 1920s politics. See Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 137.

[163] Mao Zedong, "Xin minzu zhuyi lun," *Mao Zedong Xuanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1969), Vol. 2: 658.

[164] This quotation has been frequently referenced in Anglophone scholarship. Leo Ou-fan Lee, for example, begins his overview of the critical reception of Lu Xun's work, *Lu Xun and His Legacy*, by acknowledging the statement as matching a critical consensus of literature scholars in mainland China that he will contravene in favor of a more ambivalent picture of the writer.

pole of the imagination of modernity in China, Mao Dun (born Shen Yanbing)—China's other major literary figure of the early twentieth century—occupies its opposite. A highly contradictory figure, Mao Dun eventually styled himself with a pseudonym associated with paradox. Notably, the author was never formally affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party despite his staunch, lifelong commitment to a communist worldview. His neutrality appears to have been linked to early doubts over the very idea of revolution and, accordingly, his first fiction experiments were explorations of the problem of revolution as a central impasse within Marxist theories of history and politics.[165]

Thus, while Lu Xun stands as an embodiment of the persistence of cultural revolution as a tenet of the Chinese approach to communism—or, at the very least, as a historical figure who has been repurposed in this way—Mao Dun presents an alternative approach in which culture is antithetical to revolution: for Mao Dun, culture is a site of collective labor and consists of the systematic analysis of human relations and the continuous deployment of knowledge in social praxis. Mao Dun believed deeply in a socialist modernity that would be catalyzed by the work of a cultural vanguard and which would, in turn, initiate a mass cultural movement by which the people of China would be brought to a sense of historical consciousness and agency.[166] In creating a radically new

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[165] This is expressed in themes of disillusioned young revolutionaries that Mao Dun took on in his earliest published fiction collection (*The Eclipse Trilogy*). Recent scholarship in mainland China by Zhang Guangmei discerns his growing aversion to revolutionary politics in his early work as a communist political activist. See Zhang Guangmei, "Mao Dun yu Geming Wenxuepai de 'Xian shi' Guanzhizheng," *Zhongguo Xiandai Wenxue Yanjiu Congkan* 1 (2012), 16-31. My own article, "Revolution, Forgery and The Failures of Historical Materialism: Reconsidering Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' through Mao Dun's Early Fiction," analyzes pieces of Mao Dun's short fiction in this light with particular to problems related to revolution in theories of Marxist historiography. See "Revolution, Forgery and The Failures of Historical Materialism: Reconsidering Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' through Mao Dun's Early Fiction," in *IAFOR Journal of Asian Studies* 4, no. 1, (2018).

[166] There is a possibility that this activity was spurred by an effort to correct the missteps of Proletkult in Soviet Russia: Mao Dun was reading writers throughout the 1920s that were inspired by this movement, which sought to make critics—and internal critique—a part of the labor of creativity. Mao Dun was

approach to the analysis of culture in the first half of the twentieth century, Mao Dun hoped to realize a socialist modernity in China that would be inspired by Marxism, but that would depart in significant ways from European Marxist thought.[167]

The inherent contradiction in the fact that China's most famous communist writer was not a member of the Communist Party of China throughout his life is not lost on Chinese critics.[168] This fact should lead the reader to ponder the ways in which Mao Dun resisted viewing mass politics with an oversimplification or with a mere adherence to Marxist doxa. Within this contradiction also lies a clue to the continued enigma of his personality and the challenge that his complexity as a thinker still poses to orthodoxies of socialist thought in mainland China. Mao Dun's lack of party affiliation is an irregularity that sheds light on radical ways of thinking Mao Dun introduced to modern literature, but is also a vantage that opens up alternative understandings of the future of socialism in China. His written works offer clues to what Chinese national culture would become in the next century. This was to be a future that greatly differed from the Maoist ideological principles that took hold within the leadership of CPC by the early 1940s and that dominated the country throughout most of Mao Dun's life. Mao Dun's critical writings

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similarly driven to make socialist culture autonomous and self-sustaining, rerouting and harnessing excess energies of the working class in order to guide otherwise chaotic individual artistic creation.

[167] Although traces of Mao Dun's theories persisted in the development of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," Mao Dun's reservations about the contradictions inherent in instrumentalizing cultural forms for political gain might also serve as warning at the current moment in the twenty-first century in which the communist government is erecting monotone ideals of Chinese culture. For example, the author's ambiguous reinventions of tradition in early vernacular fiction remain at odds with "The Chinese Dream" campaigns of the CPC under Xi Jinping, which are part of a continuing effort to shore up the diversity of meanings and histories underlying modern Chinese culture under a unified cultural tradition.

[168] Many literary historians have taken the author's lack of party membership as a point of departure in studies of Mao Dun's early work. Several scholars have also taken up the task of retrospectively reaffirming his abiding party loyalty in order settle debates in which his non-membership could be presented as an ideological break with founding members of the Chinese Communist Party. See, for example, Wei Tao, "Mao Dun: Woxin Yongxiang Gongchangdang" [Mao Dun: My Heart is Forever for the Communist Party," in *Beijing Zhibu Shenghuo* 4 (2013), 50-51.

foreground a twenty-first century Chinese society that departs from a national ideology conceived along the lines of party-led communism and, in its place, envisions a concept of nation increasingly founded upon a unified notion of a single mass public within which culture and technology are closely merged. [169]

Mao Dun's critical writings assert the formation of a new intellectual front among the working class. These pieces show that he was leading intellectuals away from insularity and elitism and towards a combination of mass politics, vernacular culture, and the integration of everyday life with technology. Mao Dun's critical writings present the key ingredients to retheorize modernity with art as the primary front for collective political action. In these works, art supplants revolution as the dialectical turning point in a Marxist understanding of historical change. As the focal point upon which Mao Dun trained his eye to capture emerging forms of industry and social activity in the first half of the twentieth century, Mao Dun's writings on mass culture reveal a Marxist theory of culture that anticipated later interpretations of the power dynamics underlying race and class, as well as poststructuralist notions of decentered art. Long before the digital revolution, Mao Dun's writings on mass art, screen culture, and film technology also presage a shift in philosophical thought towards the organization of civil society along the lines of information technology.

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[169] Mao Dun's writings on the proletariat masses reflect a philosophy of popular government that persists in mainland China, conceived in direct opposition to the centralized governing institutions of U.S. and European liberal democracy. This idea was informed by Marxism and compatible with communist principles, yet also differs from and predates CCP doctrines. Such a notion of a people's government is already present in Sun Yat-Sen's three principles and throughout the current New Citizens' Movement, or *xingongmin yundong*, whose lead theorist, Xu Zhiyong, declared in 2012: "There must be an end to tyranny, but the New Citizens' Movement is far from being just a democratic reformation…there must be a new kind of spiritual coalescing of the Chinese people as a whole, from the individual citizen to the entire country." See Xu Zhiyong, *Chinese Law and Government* 46, nos. 5–6 (2013), 150.

Mao Dun's approach to cultural critique sets him apart from his contemporaries cements his place as a thinker at the foundation of a modern Chinese worldview. As a mode of thought that is still held as a standard ethos of contemporary cultural intellectuals in China, Mao Dun attempts to reorient understandings of twentieth-century art as a product of the collective labor of writers and audience. In this way, Mao Dun reached towards a synthesis that was equal parts intellectualism and devotion to the vernacular—a combination that can best be understood with the metaphor of the cookbook.

The cookbook was an image that the author himself employed to imagine the task of writers and the public working in cooperation to lay a foundation for mass culture. Mao Dun writes:

> We know that works of literature and critics are born and raised together, for development and fulfillment of given school of literature must, of course, come through the guidance of a critic; but, on the other hand, there also must first be several of these schools of literature with their own works of literature, then they will be assigned to schools within literary criticism and only then emerge and become established. For instance, a good cook in the kitchen must no doubt frequently hear the comments of the guests to improve his [sic] dishes, but there must first be good dishes for guests to sample, thereupon a 'cookbook' can be created[170]

In this passage from the essay "The Proletariat Arts," an essay he wrote in 1925, what is most remarkable is Mao Dun's interest in reevaluating the role of an author as a single source of a work, especially the idea that such a single authorial source is sacrosanct—or even that one author's work constitutes a particularly unique part of the cultural life of a society. Instead, in this piece, he compares the production of the work of art to a meal, one that is shared among writers and their "guests"—critics and audiences. Mao Dun

[170] Mao Dun, "Lun Wuchanjieji Yishu," *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renming Wenxue Chubanshe, 1989), Vol. 18: 503.

employs the metaphor of the cookbook address the set of anachronistic values that had conventionally been used to evaluate art. By invoking the cookbook, Mao Dun was establishing the idea that appreciation of art is a fundamentally collective activity in modern societies, and, moreover, he was opposing this to the cultural mandates that dictated the value of a work of art. At the heart of Mao Dun's critique is the rejection of an elite class based on an assumption that cultural hierarchies are intrinsic to civil society. Thus, rather than being the proprietary possession of an elite class, ideas of art spring from the process of creation itself and aesthetic standards are conceived from within a process of continual change: "works of literature and critics are born and raised together." Much like Antonio Gramsci, Mao Dun viewed the putatively "organic" standards attached to art—established by elite culture as a political tactic—as the basis of exploitation.[171] The collective concept of art presented in Mao Dun's cookbook metaphor indicated a renegotiation of concepts of taste and prestige in a way that made aesthetic problems a function of common labor. Such imperatives were becoming clear to leftist intellectuals in China in the 1920s as mass cultural forms like film and serial fiction were opening up twentieth-century social and political life to vast numbers of people from the middle and working classes.[172]

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[171] The anti-hierarchical aim of the rhetoric used by Mao Dun in this essay becomes clear when understood from within Gramsci's historicized view of the tactics of domination employed by elite classes of intellectuals. Rather than accepting an intellectual elite as "organic" in modern society, Mao Dun is raising the question of the "function of intellectuals" to get at the ways in which the preservation of social hierarchies in China has historically led to the appearance of an "uninterrupted historical continuity" or social order conceived from within a venerated intellectual tradition. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. (New York: International Publishers, 2008), 5-9. To interrupt a notion of cultural hierarchy, Mao Dun prompts a reimagining of the intellectual from within the more directly organic relationships of the worker to food and nourishment.

[172] Mao Dun's non-hierarchical approach to reading culture frequently invokes what Bao Weihong has later identified as a continual return to a political ambivalent "mass affect" —a sensory regime that was present across cultural productions of this period in China. Searching for ways to organize these sentiments, Mao Dun nonetheless encountered these collective experiences with an excitement that withheld

In the "Proletariat Arts" essay, Mao Dun offers a critique of literary movements for the masses in Europe (including its most well-known representatives, Émile Zola and Romain Rolland) by saying that this movement has only superficially supported the concept of a mass public. He insists, for example, that Rolland's slogan of "the people's literature, for the people" is as vague and insubstantial as the American phrase of government "by the people, for the people." Through such a comparison, he also implies that these utopic theories of a people's art—ideas then attracting the attention of leftists throughout the world—were also conditioned by the same deeper capitalist motives beneath the ostensible populist democracy of the United States. He describes the way that, as with those words, Rolland seems to imply that these people are not divided in any way by conflicts like those around social class. [173] Through his rejection of naive populism and adoption of the collective model of the cookbook, he seizes on an enigmatic property of modern literature that he wishes to activate as a model for politics: he predicts that within the dominant form of cultural life in the future—a future of "proletarian arts" from which the essay takes its title—will be a form of interaction in which it will not only be understood, but universally acknowledged as a founding principle: that a work has not one but many authors. In the 1920s, Mao Dun was primarily concerned with the application of this principle within Chinese literature, but by the 1930s his attention had moved towards a range of modern media technology.

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judgement on ideological provenance. Capturing the spirit with which Mao Dun takes up novel forms of collectively produced urban culture in this period, Bao writes that "vernacular modernism and political modernism can refer to the same historical phenomenon with different interpretative emphases. If vernacular modernism elucidates the process of cultural formation, political modernism highlights the particular agency and desire of specific social groups and interests." Bao Weihong, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 23-25.

[173] Mao Dun, "Lun Wuchanjieji Yishu," Vol 18: 500-501.

Mao Dun's conception of art foreshadows Roland Barthes' much later articulation of the "Death of the Author," especially in the fact that the internal logic of Mao Dun's essay proceeds from what he perceived as a generally felt anxiety around the figure of the author, especially authors who putatively spoke for "the people." Mao Dun argues that this anxiety is the condition for an unwillingness on the part of working-class readers to engage with unknown authors who are not already part of the cultural elite. As such, he is articulating the possibility of a non-hierarchical and collective literature for a mass public that, in its practical application as a basis for politics, goes beyond Barthes's more introspective notion of an individualized "reader without history."[174] On the contrary, for Mao Dun, history, polyvocal and intersubjective, is urgently embedded within texts in which the labor of many readers and writers interact.

This different approach to modern texts that are nevertheless identified as originating in collective provenance, "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture," also arose from Mao Dun's unique interpretation of Marxism as a template for the study of culture.[175] Whereas for Barthes this diffuse notion of text meant that all meaning and interpretation was forever deferred, through the idea of the cookbook, Mao Dun sought to draw together all of the social forces of construction of the modern text to create authorless and nonhierarchical texts as a revolutionary act. Thus conceived, the collective text, existing within an anti-hegemonic network organized around the common activity of creating meaning through taste, runs counter to the radical contingency Barthes characterizes as "revolutionary," which he defines as an "anti-

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[174] Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1953), 148.
[175] Barthes, 146.

theological activity" of the refusal of meaning. Of course, Mao Dun's hope for a praxis that, like the composition of a cookbook, would identify and organize these "innumerable centres of culture" has an endearing if unattainable optimism, but it also signals his unflagging conviction that products of culture must no longer be alienated from the labor that creates them, past or present (insisting, incidentally, upon reviving the *life* of labor, in a way that is diametrically opposed to the infamous trope that Barthes employs).

Unlike the "world text" that Barthes proposes, Mao Dun's cookbook encourages us to think of culture in terms of the recipe: A cookbook is a text defined by being under construction, as well as inviting use. The text then becomes an assemblage created by a hypothetical subject position occupied by the cook, which could be either reader or writer, and potentially both. Such a text is not merely open to interpretation, but a project of constant experimentation.[176] The description of the cookbook shows Mao Dun imagining in food as a model for an art that would take on a deeply important function in a new kind of socialist state: food was a paradigmatic everyday cultural form that exhibited the way that materiality and labor could be reintegrated into art in modernity. The long and distinguished history of professionalism in Chinese cuisine also entails that this notion of culture can fuse art and life and thereby constitute a significant step towards bringing the people of a society closer to a state of historical consciousness.

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[176] One might also think here of either the English term "recipe" with its origin in "recitation," or "receipt"—with the sense of something marked paid. Each of these analogous terms alludes to a way of working is drawn from a network of citations, that while in some sense authoritative, are also based in a history of experience that is radically non-elite and mass-oriented. Similarly, in Mao Dun's text the term cookbook (食谱), reflects an etymological origin in works of reference, citation, and recitation (with a large number of words in modern Chinese employing the second character "谱" in reference to musical notation and recital).

As a fundamental part of reconciling literature with the realities and injustices of daily life in modern societies, Mao Dun argues for an evolutionary view of culture working within the full scope of its social construction, the interaction of readers and writers, who are simultaneously critics.[177] The initial step of creating dishes required experimentation on the part of many cooks (authors who come to constitute a discourse, but write before it exists), but this would immediately begin the work of the "cookbook." This collective activity demystifies the hidden labor that distorts the work of art or literature as commodity, which imparts a deceptive appearance of purity on cultural objects of the elite. Instead, with this model, Mao Dun insists that disorder and failure should be a part of its concoction. Throughout his critical writings, Mao Dun insisted that a mode of cultural criticism along these lines would have a radically important role in society. Thus, rather than a standard of freedom of expression as a liberal ideal of the productive conflict within a an imagined "marketplace," which acts as a convenient diversion from the conflict waged between the classes, the labor of the kitchen would be the imaginary matrix of open political debate about any cultural topic, especially the value of art.

Nonetheless, the passage also states that authors must exist to provide "good dishes for guests to sample" and, accordingly, despite the fact that he was becoming known as a reputable author by the late 1920s, Mao Dun's work as an editor, work in which he specialized in offering prescriptive challenges, frequently took precedent over

[177] Barthes differs notably from Mao Dun in that—in his theory of the modern text—critics disappear along with authors, while, for Mao Dun the critic becomes an instrumental force in collective culture. The critic is thus conceived not as an elite intellectual but quite the opposite, as a humble dinner guest.

his career as a fiction writer. [178] He viewed his own most important labor as seeking out who were devising new forms of fiction, for example, introducing audiences to writers like Bing Xin, whose early fiction was featured in the magazine and who became his lifelong friend. Putting his ideas on collaborative definitions of literature into practice, Mao Dun launched the early critical discussion of the author's work in "A Theory of Bing Xin" in 1934 in *Literature*. He carried out a thorough critique of "idealism" and "dualism" in her work, while noting that, instead of faithfully engaging in realism, her work was based a "distorted reflection of her self."[179] Seeking new forms of realism was a project of constantly critiquing even one's closest friends and colleagues in an unflagging effort to capture the changing experience of being situated between past and future in a way that was as connected to daily life as the food that came out of the kitchens of the people.[180]

Although seemingly an ambitious portrait of a culture that was yet to come, his critical writings show that Mao Dun worked to execute the collectivist model of literature described in "The Proletariat Arts." Mao Dun concludes by stating that the emergence of a network of writers, critics and audience mutually working as participant-actors is a

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[178] Mao Dun wrote several essays discussing the social value of the commercial press and describing contradictions of work of writers and editors in the commercial marketplace. In pieces like "Women suo Bixu Chuangzao de Wenyi Zuopin" (1932), published in *Bei Dou*, Mao Dun expressed cynicism towards sensationalism in the popular press and urged writers to take up critical realism as a mode of anti-imperialism. See Mao Dun, "Women suo Bixu Chuangzao de Wenyi Zuopin" in *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renming Wenxue Chubanshe, 1991), Vol. 19: 313-315.

[179] Mao Dun, "Bingxin Lun," *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1990), Vol 20: 165.

[180] In *Labor and Desire*, Paula Rabinowitz cites a nearly identical comment by proletarian fiction author and editor Mike Gold in the United States in 1929, she writes of his essay "Go Left, Young Author!": "attempting to wrest writing from the control of the elite and place it in the hands of the common people...[as] a mundane activity of the body, not an exalted one of the mind." See Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 25. The overlap between these calls for an anti-elitist approach to writing suggests that such approaches to proletariat fiction as a bodily and organic practice linked to labor were taking shape into a worldwide internationalist movement among left-wing intellectuals.

practicable political goal because it is a self-fulfilling historical destiny. Mao Dun argues that to bring about a consciousness of all of the intricacies of "an art of the masses" was not a "utopianism" because at the heart of the critic's work was an immanence, in which to "rashly dream" was as much cultural role as a political act:

> Nowadays there are really very few of the proletariat works of literature like the ones discussed above, regarding the critical theories of proletarian arts, the hopes that we have cannot be too great— to rashly dream of a theory of proletarian art its own rich fulfillment[181]

Rather than revolution, political change begins from the activation of the cultural critic's "dream of a theory," which sparks a realization of consciousness embedded in proletarian cultural forms. Such a formulation not only upends mimesis, but also linear (and vertical) concepts of time and history, thereby opening up a space for a new collectivity in both labor and culture (which, consequently, overlap and integrate). Here again, writing of a conception of modern literature that preexists, anticipates and yet diverges from Barthes' poststructuralist cultural theories: every text is written synchronically, in a here and now in which it is both conceived of and reaches self-fulfillment. Mao Dun thus outlines a quality of immanence that Barthes argues distinguishes modern texts, in which "utterance has no other content than the act by which it is uttered," from classical definitions of aesthetic based on a mimesis that is one step removed from such articulation as an event of self-presence.[182]

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[181] Mao Dun, "Lun Wuchanjieji Yishu," Vol 18: 503

[182] In pushing for a text expressing collective consciousness, Mao Dun takes up a quality of the literary text that, according to Barthes, defines modern writing: "to write can no longer designate an operation of recording, of observing, of representing, of 'painting' (as the Classic writers put it), but rather what the linguisticians…call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given to the first person and to the present), in which utterance has no other content than the act by which it is uttered." See Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," 145.

Beginning from such a disruption, in both the essay on "Proletarian Arts" (written for *Literature* magazine), as well as in writings on realism that he develops in later essays, Mao Dun engages in a radical redefinition of the relation of culture to social life, within which intellectualism would originate in the bodies of workers. Above all, his critical approach possesses one defining characteristic—a point upon which Mao Dun's work closely aligns with the writings of Antonio Gramsci—radical social change begins from the working class taking part in a continual coming to self-consciousness within history. In other words, the work of writer, critic and audience are seized upon by the proletariat as a collective labor that is constantly enmeshed in, and intimately aware of, a future in the process of writing itself into being. The proletariat thereupon would attain a position in culture through which it would catalyze historical change based on the needs and concerns of workers. In the process, the boundaries separating fields of production and reception, represented by terms that position cultural workers and their context, such as artist, art, text and society, would dissolve into a new paradigm of subjectivity in modernity that would form from a collective consciousness involved in its own "rich fulfillment." This notion fueled Mao Dun's later drive to create a theory of realism as a praxis of the proletariat vanguard working collectively, a realist praxis whose process he seeks to define in reflections on labor and technology written in the middle and late 1930s.

However, in the 1920s, Mao Dun saw a paradigmatic problem that dominated the work of communist theories of culture, namely, finding a way to remake the world of politics through culture. Such an aim followed from what both Mao Dun and Antonio Gramsci had, through years of direct political activism, come to perceive as an outdated,

flawed and, essentially impractical concept of revolution. Mao Dun's work as a functionary of the communist party, which he had begun in the early 1920s, at the very outset of his work as a writer, required straddling several groups, including a hegemony of intellectuals and military strategists, all the while pushing for the establishment of a structure of civil society based in factory workers, farmers and other groups of the working class in China. Much like the leaders of several local communist groups, who were torn between the official proclamations of the Comintern and the organic needs of their own people, Mao Dun pushed for a conscious remaking of society in a way that would put the masses of workers in the lead and pushed against settling for the creation of an insular party leadership as a political banner under which workers would rally when conditions were most dire. Mao Dun's increasing attention to this problem in his critical writings throughout the 1930s indicates that this very conviction cemented his will to become a writer and critic rather than continue in the direct pursuit of revolutionary goals, as he had as an activist throughout the 1920s until his exile in 1927.

In a portion of his writings from Turi in 1926, Antonio Gramsci succinctly declared that "all men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals."[183] As Mao Dun's contemporary in Italy's *Partido Comunista Italiano* (PCI), and a figure who, like Mao Dun, was a close observer of the cultural aspects of political change, Gramsci identifies a paradox that was the foundation of Mao Dun's work and was at the foundation of tactics that aimed at replacing the cultural elite with a cultural leadership drawn from the proletariat. Engaging in such a measure meant obliterating the mystique surrounding the thinking man and the man of

[183] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 9.

letters, and simultaneously calling for ways in which the masses of the populace could bring forth organic intellectuals to remake society in the image of and for the benefit of the many. This is precisely what Mao Dun was also in the process of discovering from his own early work negotiating between different party factions—elite, workers and peasantry. As a figure whose thought shares many affinities with Mao Dun, and who had spent years doggedly focused on putting these thoughts to words, Gramsci should be seen as an interlocutor. His ideas, however, do not capture the full range of complexity of Mao Dun's social thought, but his notion of intellectual praxis, rooted as it is in analogous historical contradictions of local and international communist movements, can help contextualize Mao Dun's most important theoretical critiques of the features of communism in China the 1930s.

In the writings that form the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci articulated a problem that was perplexing communist thinkers of the 1920s and 1930s, and which V.I. Lenin had raised in a rudimentary way in the much earlier pamphlet "What is to Be Done?" These texts share with Mao Dun's critical writings the dilemma over the place of intellectuals within the incremental process of social change towards a stable communist society: "The problem of creating a new stratum of intellectuals." Gramsci, for his part, noted that the solution to such a problem would not come from communist theorists outside of working classes but instead "[consist] in the critical elaboration of the intellectual activity that exists in everyone at a certain degree of development."[184] In other words, for communist intellectuals during this period, all intellectual activities—all of the domain that belonged to culture—would be devoted to this "critical elaboration."

[184] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 9.

Moreover, in this vision of a non-revolutionary Marxism, a cultural vanguard of the working class would subsume the elite intelligentsia who had been the power brokers of private civil society within advanced capitalism.

The result would be the formation of an intellectual leadership, within which the inborn abilities of the working class, the technical knowledge of laborers, would be expanded into a form of social agency that would encompass not only technical knowledge but also harder-to-define, assumptive logics of capitalism, such as taste and prestige. Above all, this intellectual class would represent labor that is no longer specialized into new divisions of technical labor, but fully realized into a level of society that Gramsci terms *dirigente*: a power of leadership arising from technical skills merged with interpersonal acumen. Mao Dun is an intellectual figure situated at the cusp of the rise of such a group of working-class intellectuals. As such, he assumed a station as the communist party's iconic figure through which this new vanguard would be imagined and discussed. The question of Mao Dun's party membership, (which has become a source of controversy and subfield within Mao Dun scholarship), also revolves around this difficult task. Some speculate that Mao Dun may have been dispatched as an undercover agent to write covertly in order to stimulate a vanguard from within the media industry. Recently, several writers in China have speculated that a tactical decision was made at Yan'an that Mao Dun should be a writer who works for "revolution" through cultural means from outside of the party.[185]

[185] See, for example, Dou Yingtai and Ma Yongbing, "Zuojia Shen Yanbing zhi Si Bu Yu de 'Rudang' Qingjie," *Dangshi Bocai* 8 (2004): 39-40.

Whether or not this came as a direct mandate by the CCP, Mao Dun was indeed actively involved in the creation of an intellectual vanguard not connected to political leadership, and thus assured his own place in this vanguard. Meanwhile, he continued to pen self-conscious reflections on the irresolvable problem of revolution in Marxist theories of history. Attempts by mainstream Chinese intellectuals to recuperate Mao Dun within party history and align him with the goals of the contemporary political elite must be viewed not only as claims upon the political genealogy of his work, but also as active attempts to fend off critical evaluations that could reconsider his work as offering an alternative theory of Chinese communism. A possible sign of the antagonism Mao Dun felt towards revolution as an organizing principle of Marxist history which, at times, set him at odds with the broader goals of the party's political leadership, lies in the intermittent nature of Mao Dun's favorable image within the party—his participation notably lapsing after the collapse of the United Front in 1927, after which peasant-focused revolution led by Mao Zedong became the primary goal of the CCP. In the period of the dictatorship of the party after the 1940s, Mao Dun maintained a role in the country's intellectual leadership, but was also sent into exile with the resurgence of revolutionary zeal in the early 1960s. The conflicted nature of his views about revolution were also notable in that they were not split along the lines of conventional debates over whether Chinese communism should follow Stalinism, Leninism or Trotskyism. In fact, his experiences visiting Soviet Russia in 1946 may have accelerated his formation of an autonomous theory of intellectual work within Chinese communism.[186] In any case,

[186] Lorenz Bichler writes of the way that the disappointment that Mao Dun had experienced during his visit to Soviet Russia contributed to his already growing skepticism in established forms of international communism. See Lorenz Bichler, "Conjectures on Mao Dun's Silence as a Novelist after 1949" in *Autumn Floods: Essays in Honour of Marian Galik* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997), 195-206.

speculations on and dramatizations of Mao Dun's personal tribulations aside, what is clear is that, throughout his writing career, his primary focus lay in identifying the specific cultural processes behind the formation of intellectuals within a communist society. For many of these forms of communist intellectualism, Mao Dun sought not to be an advocate from a standpoint of critical remove, but to be a figure who could actively be regarded as a model for the working-class intellectual.

This new model of an intellectual was predicated on an emerging concept of the people, a populace thought in terms of "masses": a coherent, if diverse social totality emerging from a movement of "massification" and thus a prescriptive term regarding a meeting of theory and praxis, rather than an existing descriptive or empirical phenomenon.[187] In practical terms, much of the on-the-ground work of intellectuals involved in this movement entailed bringing about a concept of a unified Chinese people in a society tending towards factionalism, with a nationwide working class divided by intersecting differences of region, class strata, and ethnicity, as the first step in establishing a new intellectual class in a worker's state. Mao Dun utilized his position as an editor, as well as his talents as a writer, in nimble argumentation in newspaper columns that functioned as public fora, to demonstrate a specific approach to the problem that both he and Gramsci had perceived. His writings reveal a determination to reach a greater public audience and bring awareness of the fact that "the critical elaboration" of intellectual agency in the working class—especially one that created a unified society, rather than a society unified under a party—consisted in activating an intellectual agency

[187] For English-language scholarship concerning the ways in which the "masses" and "massification" were subject to contesting interpretations within the CCP by leading propaganda official Deng Tuo—and finally in pronouncements by Mao Zedong in 1942 in Yan'an—see Timothy Cheek, *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 94-96.

in the proletariat through achieving an authentic historical consciousness of its own existence, past and future.

In a letter to the editor in the August 1922 issue of *Fiction Monthly*, titled "How to Improve the People's Appreciation of Literature," Mao Dun highlighted the contrast between what he saw as the imminent emergence of a people's literature and the inevitable decline of the control over national culture that had been enjoyed by elite classes.[188] The piece was published as a response to a reader's skepticism over the magazine's recent turn towards printing examples of popular literature. The letter writer went by the name of Zhang Kan and included his professional title "Zhejiang Fifth Grade Teacher." He commented that although "he thinks that literature should have a democratic spirit," at the same time, "it just should not lose its true purpose."[189] The letter expresses cynicism towards the efforts of the editors of *Fiction Monthly* to offer literature written for a broader public audience. Zhang Kan responds to the efforts of the editors by declaring that "it is difficult to blindly fathom the profundities of abstruse theory that seek a way of making everything common; I fear that this kind of thing is just [done for] its own amusement."[190]

Finally, the fifth grade teacher, with quite a convincing rhetorical flourish, weighs in on what he sees as the problems of a Chinese intellectual environment that fosters a "massification" of culture (literally, *pubianhua*, 普遍化, which could more literally be

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[188] Mao Dun, "Zenme Tiegao Minzhong de Wenxue Jinshangle?" *Xiaoshuo Yuebao* 8, no. 13 (1922): 146-147.

[189] In his comments, the "teacher" rather strangely uses a phonetic transliteration of the English term, rather than the Chinese *minzhu* (民主), which had long been in popular usage since becoming enshrined as a Chinese political concept during Sun Yat Sen's rise as a political leader in early 20th century mainland China.

[190] Mao Dun, "Zenme Tiegao Minzhong de Wenxue Jinshangle?," 146-147

rendered as “making common” or “making universal”), at the expense of some presumably more “noble” values of literature:

> Sir! Today we see all that is more common in society being welcomed, but these are simply obscurantist reading materials, considered as literature very few of these have any value...and they [the people] aren’t in any position to regard them as literature because they do not understand. If it is a foreign novel, then it just consists of foreign customs and atmosphere...Sir, you fervently advocate ‘a people’s literature’ but perhaps ‘the people’ are still just ‘people’ and ‘literature’ is still just ‘literature’ and a ‘people’s literature’ will never be reached, instead, at the moment, I feel a ‘literary people’ is what should come from writing.[191]

Mao Dun was a head editor of the magazine but, at the time, he was little-known as an author of fiction in his own right, having only published his creative work in student magazines. He not only composed a personal answer to this indignant reader, but chose the letter as the first to display in the correspondence section of that month's issue. His willingness to engage in debate shows the rigorous spirit of critique he brought to the magazine. Despite his staunch leftist political convictions, he was never an unyielding orthodox Marxist merely looking for confirmation of his beliefs, but was instead interested in the magazine becoming a long-term forum for developing theories of literature and social change.

The teacher’s letter maligns the editorial choices that were largely initiated by Mao Dun during what had been only a short tenure as editor at the magazine. The reader’s ire was reflective of the waves that Mao Dun had been causing among the magazine’s readership with his politically charged statements on the magazine’s role in initiating a new future for modern Chinese literature. The young Mao Dun had gained recognition as a rising voice in debates over the future of Chinese literature as he

[191] Mao Dun, 146-147.

consciously stirred up controversy while reinvigorating the decade-old *Fiction Monthly* magazine with a series of manifestos.

The first manifesto Mao Dun issued in the magazine was within the context the translation column over which Mao Dun had recently taken charge. That declaration was met with at least one negative letter from a reader criticizing Mao Dun's promotion of realism inspired by a cosmopolitan and transhistorical worldview.[192] Soon after, and possibly due to the spirited debate that followed from the first manifesto in the magazine's letters section, in which he displayed an extensive knowledge of European and Russian literature in responding to his critics, Mao Dun took of the role of head editor of *Fiction Monthly*. With this promotion, the writer made his mark on the future of the magazine by publishing "Manifesto for the Reform of *Fiction Monthly*" ("小说月报革命宣言"). Published in the first issue of the new year in the Gregorian calendar, the manifesto was placed immediately after a New Year's greeting from the publisher, and within opening pages featuring reproductions of paintings by Edgar Degas and Auguste Renoir, as well as colorful advertisements for Eastman Kodak Cameras, Two Baby Cigarettes and Dr. Williams "Pink Pills for Pale People." The dramatic impact of the "Manifesto for the Reform of *Fiction Monthly*" was heightened by the fact that that the

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[192]Mao Dun's first manifesto was boldly outsized for the column of foreign translations he was assigned to as an assistant editor. He used this platform to call for a new vision for the magazine as a whole, based on his research in foreign styles and genres—and with a clear objective of the establishing the fact that social realism is a centuries-old, indigenous form of literature in mainland China—he wrote that "the newest is not always the most beautiful or the best. Everything that is new carries with it its own colors that fit a certain period of time, that are new for that time; not only just 'beautiful' or 'good.' 'Beauty' and 'good' are [properties of] reality [here, Mao Dun parenthetically adds the English word "reality" for "真实"]. The value of reality is that it does not change with the era. The 'beauty' and 'good' of old literature cannot be erased. So, we must not distinguish between old and new literature…Western and Chinese literature, we believe that all can be very helpful in the current moment of innovation in Chinese literature." See Mao Dun, "'Xiaoshuo Xinchao' Lanxuanyan," Vol 18: 13.

piece is unlisted in the table of contents. Opening the issue and looking for a piece by Zhou Zuoren, Lu Xun's younger brother, on the relationship between sacred texts and literature, the reader unexpectedly finds Mao Dun's manifesto—an announcement that the magazine will be China's first magazine dedicated to literary criticism.

The manifesto connected his work to worldwide theoretical trends linking literature to forms of social analysis by declaring that the magazine would make "criticism" its highest priority, using the word in English in the Chinese text. With this bold statement, Mao Dun began a career as China's most recognizable cultural critic, while also establishing a cross-cultural modern literary aesthetics. Remarking upon a strength of "western foreign literature" ("西洋文艺"), the manifesto stresses the importance of establishing a critical apparatus and the creation of a vernacular literature written by and for the working class. These sentiments were repeated elsewhere as he connected a sphere of cultural criticism to the formation of an academic study of literature in the West, showing that "criticism has an especially great authority within literature…[but] our own country does not have its own form of criticism." Thus, he gives literary criticism the status of a modern philosophy, predicated not only on interpreting the world, but embracing a desire to change it. He states that through the expression of personal beliefs, a new class of writers will emerge, and describes urgent circumstances in which "there must first be critics, then there will be true writers."[193]

Mao Dun's response to the teacher's letter displayed the talents that made him a promising head editor: he possessed a remarkable originality for explaining radical theories of culture in plainspoken terms. He answered the letter by describing the

[193] Mao Dun, "Xiaoshuo Yuebao Geming Xuanyan," *Xiaoshuo Yuebao*, 7, 10 (1921), 1-7.

egalitarian literary culture that he hoped was in China's future, one that was accessible to the broadest possible range of readers, despite deep divisions among the working class, the urban professional class and the highly educated elite that existed within the magazine's readership.

At the time, Mao Dun was twenty-six years old, and only about seven years before had moved away from his home in rural Zhejiang. Apart from his already extensive work as an activist within the emerging communist party (in common parlance he is sometimes regarded as "the first member of the Chinese communist party" ["中国共产党最早的党员之一"], for his secret participation in the country's first communist group in Shanghai in 1921), he also was drawing on five years of editorial experience, having already held similar positions at several Shanghai magazines. Editorial work was a practical education for the young writer, as he learned to publicly appeal for a redefinition of the arts under the rubric of collective creative labor, which he saw as the fundamental task of Chinese communism, because this was the key to redeeming a literary and intellectual culture that had remained largely detached from the trials experienced by majority of the China's population. As the country unsteadily navigated a new form of representative government, Mao Dun called for a movement that would produce a new intellectual vanguard out of the working class to eventually remake both government and society.

In his reply to the fifth-grade teacher, an example of his rhetorical strategies for reframing debates on intellectualism, Mao Dun employs a culinary metaphor to explore the relation between literature and society. Through this, he successfully defamiliarizes

entrenched concepts of class and the popular, while also implicitly addressing the tacit formation of social values around dubious criteria like taste and quality.

> The pureness of Chinese literary culture—if there is such a thing—had never been something that the populace was in touch with; so that the Chinese people's potential for appreciating literature really runs to extremes. It's like a person who has only eaten mutton with raw onions and garlic their whole lives, they've long had an appetite for eating food that is earthy, they just won't touch the delicacies of a fine restaurant.[194]

Through this comparison of the pungent flavors of popular literature and the delicate fare of *belles lettres*, Mao Dun offers his interlocutor a way of empathizing with his fellow citizens' engagement with literature through more deeply physical sensations. Questioning the existence of any pure concept of literature, he redirects the discussion towards the nature of the organic literary culture that arises from the populace. Although there might be an "earthiness" to the flavors of a people's literature, he turns preconceptions about the triviality of popular culture on their heads by suggesting that it is instead the "delicacies" enjoyed by the educated elite that are inessential, in part because the value of elite literature is to reflect the good taste and status of those who enjoy it as an amusement.

Thus, without explicitly raising the political debates happening around mass culture in China's intellectual circles, the comparison with food brings an otherwise overdetermined concept of literature more clearly into view: literature not as pure, noble, or distinct, but as one field of cultural production among many others, which is then reconnected to the familiar symbolic economy of daily cultural activities that involve the body, the household, and the family. Mao Dun's response reflects the firm conviction that

[194] Mao Dun, "Lun Wuchanjieji Yishu," Vol. 18: 503.

giving culture over to the people would revolutionize and reinvent society: literature itself would never remake a people—culture under capitalism was a hegemonic system of imposed values—a vernacular for cultural expression had to be sought by way of the people gaining greater agency and historical self-consciousness.

Instead of using the term for democracy that had been current in China for decades, the letter writer's awkwardly transliterated phonetic rendition for the English word "democracy" ("德莫克拉西," which would be pronounced "*de mo ke la xi*"), further shows that something else is afoot in the letter. While putatively challenging the theories of the aesthetics of mass culture upon which Mao Dun had based his editorial decisions, the subtext of the teacher's letter actually exhibits a keen anxiety over foreign influences. Despite its seemingly innocuous pedantry, the teacher's letter appears to be an oblique indictment of what he views as the intrusion of an alien and impure intellectual culture, including (and perhaps especially), the imported theories of Marxism and socialism that inspired Mao Dun's work on realism and populist strains of literature. Traces of anxiety over an ineradicable foreignness forcing its way into Chinese cultural life become explicit, for example, in the letter's description of literature that indulges an attraction for exotic places (which he describes as "a style of foreign soil and emotion").

The word that Mao Dun uses for mutton in his response, *shan*, conveys an noxious odor or flavor, related to the smell of someone who raises sheep or goats, thus recalling the cuisines of non-Han ethnic groups in the far north and west.[195] This alludes to marginalized groups, often inhabiting the borderlands (a space that thematically recurs

[195] 羶: The authoritative *Da Cihai* (大辞海) dictionary also a definition that attributes the smell of such meat to lower-classes by describing the offensiveness of the odors of mutton and citing historic instances in which the word was used to designate meat was avoided by members of the nobility. See *Da Cihai*, eds. Dacihai Bianji Weiyuanhui, (Shanghai Shanghaicishu Chubanshe, 2003), 3023.

throughout Mao Dun's short fiction), but nonetheless viewed as Chinese peoples within the scope of the intracultural makeup of China's historical domain in modernity. Arguments for purity are rendered irrelevant through Mao Dun's figure of speech likening China's literature to China's cuisine. Just as this word for mutton demonstrates that what is seemingly alien to certain constructs of Chinese culture are already familiar and internal to it, so these peoples are a part of the makeup of China's populace and their traditional foods are part of its cuisine. China has for millennia been engaged with the world and, as a result, its national culture has been an ethnically diverse one. In this way, Mao Dun's rhetorical uses of sensations evoked by food not only show the way in which he perceived literature as connected to body and place, but also bring up complicated conflicts arising from linking nationalism to race—an intellectual habit that underlay objections to embracing mass culture.

From Mass Action to Mass Culture

Mao Dun took the first steps towards defining life by aligning literature and the arts with mass culture described in the 1940 essay "The Popular, Massification, and Becoming China." In the essay, he begins to define massification by pinpointing a different term, *dazhonghua* [大众化] or, literally, "becoming masses," which he notes had already become a "movement" with a groundswell of support by the time of the resistance against the Japanese occupation (known as 一-二八 in Chinese) and which finally culminated in the student protests of December 9, 1935.[196] Mao Dun specifically contrasts

[196] Philosopher Li Zehou identifies this massification a part of a larger and paradoxical phenomenon of Chinese modernity as a process of "becoming China" through a recovery of the vernacular. In *On the History of Modern Chinese Thought*, Li provides an intellectual history of the kind radically populist

massification, a spontaneous gathering of the masses that began with the unification against Japanese military aggression, with Chiang Kai-Shek's cultural program of a New Life Movement.[197]

Mao Dun indicates that massification, which first consisted of groups of youth taking to the street, was leading to a mass movement that would overtake the importance of the May Fourth Movement. In this context, what he calls "becoming China," he explains that art becomes a practice of the workers learning about themselves through cultural productions created from the "flavor," "moods," and "words" of the people.[198] In doing so, massification was creating a national culture synonymous with mass culture and thus a society in which all members achieve knowledge of self within history.[199] His notion of "becoming China" draws on Mao Zedong's "Theory of the New Classes" and relates directly to a reckoning of mass culture with history. The passage that inspires the

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and democratic gestures characteristic of cultural movements of the pre-CCP era—movements of which Mao Dun was a major proponent. Li describes as massification and popularization as foundations of modern Chinese epistemology, but he points out that the push towards the vernacular that was mobilized by the May Fourth Movement was a brief lapse in a longer movement back towards the foundational vernacular cultural forms of the past—including folk dancing, folk music, and vernacular literature like *Water Margin* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*. He writes that subsequent generation of intellectuals that rejected May Fourth principles merely expressed an already powerful mass sentiment and turned it into the political and cultural status quo. Li includes Mao Zedong's Yan'an declaration and the revolutionary ideals of Maoism in this critique. See Li Zehou, *Zhongguo Xiandai Sixianglun* (Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 1986), 79-86. Although Li notes that an expression of such convictions were common to the writings of Mao Dun, Ba Jin, and Lu Xun, a close study of Mao Dun's writings in this period reveals that he is a particularly powerful proponent of establishing a vernacular mass culture that seeks complete unity with modes of knowledge that form the everyday life of the proletariat classes.

[197] Mao Dun, "Tongsu, Dazhonghua yu Zhongguohua" in *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1993), Vol. 22: 89-90.

[198] Mao Dun unites three elements of mass culture in a tripartite development, "popular [culture], massification and becoming China" 89, and he writes that the vernacular created by the May Fourth Movement had been limited by the fact that it had never "picked the words from the very lips of the masses" [未能尽量采用大众口头上的字眼]). See Mao Dun, "Tongsu, Dazhonghua yu Zhongguohua," Vol. 22: 89.

[199] This worldview is frequently captured by critics in China that describe a "historical poetics"—which could also be rendered as an "epic" sensibility, displayed within in Mao Dun's fiction—a trait that characterizes his work far more for the majority of Chinese readers than the "realism" with which he is frequently associated in Anglophone scholarship. See *Zhongguo Xiandai Wenxueshi Jingbian* 1917-2012, ed. Zhu Donglin (Beijing: Gaodeng Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2014), esp. chapter Three, "Xiandai Xiaoshuo (Er)."

phrase denotes a reflexive relationship with the past and a process of historical becoming. Moreover, the basis of the essay's descriptions of cultural politics in Mao Zedong's social theories makes it quite clear that the concepts of culture and history are being discussed within a dialogue that is largely autonomous from European philosophy and, moreover, even separate from Marxist thought within this philosophy. He establishes this with a final citation from Mao, who says that while the people of China will be adherents of a Marxist theory of history, they will not be cut off from the "10,000 year history of their people" but instead "are still young students before it" ["我们还是小学生"].[200]

This 1940 essay is the most comprehensive statement of the nuanced view of history against which Mao Dun had been defining mass culture throughout the 1930s. Read in light of his retrospective synthesis of the problems of redefining cultural life as a foundation for national unification that had challenged China in the 1930s, Mao Dun's response to the teacher's letter reveals that besides connecting the popular to a mode of bodily experience through reference to taste, he was also already sensitive to the underlying causes of the teacher's anxieties and his motives for opposing the popular. As the recurring metaphors related to food demonstrate, although Mao Dun may not yet have fit into place all of the pieces of his understanding of culture, he very early on perceived purity as a ruse by the intellectual elite. Such measures were taken by this elite to flatten and homogenize the cultural field and to make the Chinese public fall in line under the mystified aura of prestige that could be generated from the mythos of former Chinese empires. Even as this history was under constant scrutiny within Chinese modernist movements, it was precisely under these circumstances that the past needed to be

[200] Mao Dun, "Tongsu, Dazhonghua yu Zhongguohua," Vol. 22: 91.

"articulated historically," taken up as a subject for the reflection of young students who would, in Walter Benjamin's words "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" rather than accept a totalizing narrative of history from either international Marxism or Chinese intellectuals. Mao Dun responded to letters with a generosity of spirit that invited intellectuals with opposing ideologies into dialogue with his ideas. Letters to the editor in *Fiction Monthly* are read more casually than the more serious fiction that is promised to the reader within each issue, but it is through this ephemerality that these letters reveal so much. Mao Dun's response models to the public are a kind of intellectualism that is involved in both organizing knowledge and simultaneously persuading audience and interlocutor. With these forms of soft persuasion, he is nonetheless deeply involved with what Gramsci "struggle to assimilate and to conquer 'ideologically' the traditional intellectuals" in a group that is in the process of "elaborating its own organic intellectuals."[201]

Doggedly pursuing questions of taste and appreciation as a comparativist, Mao Dun stood at the threshold of a new stage of Chinese intellectual history, one which sought to mobilize the vast political energies of masses of young student protesters and workers. He thereby sought a self-conscious push to surpass the May Fourth Movement and to drive towards the formation of an intellectual leadership that would integrate intellectualism within the terms of a newly coherent social whole of workers.[202] Thus, by

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[201] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 10.

[202] Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Mao Dun wrote numerous essays retrospectively declaring that the May Fourth movement was instrumental in creating historical change but had become obsolete as a movement for radical political change in mainland China. In these pieces, he described the May Fourth Movement as caught within an ideology dedicated to prolonging the dominance of a bourgeoisie intellectual class. See, for example, Mao Dun, "'Wusi' Yun Dong de Tao Lun," *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1991), Vol 19: 231-248.

refuting the claims of the cultural elite as part of a single and continuous cultural tradition constituting the totality of China's 10,000-year history, during these early writings as editor for *Fiction Monthly* Mao Dun created solid foundations for a mass culture that aimed towards fuller historical consciousness. This required care in avoiding a return to circumstances in which knowledge of China would be constructed on an essentialist myth of origin, especially one that implied that culture rested upon racial or ethnic unity. Instead, the author shapes a paradoxically open-ended sinocentrism staged around an emerging concept of the diverse and heterogeneous mass culture of twentieth-century China. This was the discursive context within which he was endorsing the advantages of a comparative literature that drew from European thought on the culture of the working class but that resisted being swallowed up by or beholden to these ideas. In terms of the study of world literature, of which by the end of the 1930s, as the editor of *Fiction Monthly*, he was looked to as an expert by the reading public, this organic intellectualism was only possible by achieving a simultaneous dialogue and antagonism with non-Chinese forms of literature.

Mao Dun's creative metaphors for literature expand China's discourse on history while rendering inert a rhetoric of origin and purity—a powerful political tool of a conservative elite— and in this way anticipates Benedict Anderson's writings on racism and the formation of national ideologies of race to complicate and contradict imagining new national social formations. Anderson notes that ideas leading to the formation of cohesive nation states are rendered in "terms of historical destinies," "while racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history" (149). This line of critical thought in

the work of Mao Dun takes the very first steps towards a cultural theory based on establishing mass culture as a new kind of modern vernacular in a way that goes beyond literature itself. Eventually, all of his intellectual work, both as a fiction writer and a cultural critic, theorized a merging of historical consciousness and mass culture with the aim of making a case for a uniquely Chinese modernity.

Of course, theories of nation abounded during China's complicated transition into a liberal model of government and civil society. Chinese nationalism never sought to create a new nation from scratch. The theories of nationalism and subnationalism explicated in Anderson's *Imagined Communities* could never escape the pull of a Chinese-oriented concept of nationhood with ties to China's imperial past. The staggering difficulty of defining a transhistorical essence of Chinese nationhood is one of the recurring themes in Lu Xun's fiction and it was also central part of the intellectual project of Liang Qichao and Sun Yat Sen.[203] In the work of these writers, as well as many of their lesser-known contemporaries and colleagues, concepts of revolution inherited from eighteenth-century France and later elaborated by Marx become altered and adapted to Chinese historical experience. Nonetheless, approaching the prospects of the future sovereignty of non-elite masses as a cultural theorist, Mao Dun was especially sensitive to the fact that establishing continuities with the past within the modern nation was a process fraught with internalized and ahistorical quandaries over identity. These

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[203] See Rebecca Karl's discussion of Liang Qichao's theories of Chinese history in terms of an intrinsic or natural essence of nation in *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 99-149. Karl links early discourses on race and the idea of a nationally unified people (*minzu*) to the early twentieth century formations of statist nationalism and ethnonationalism. She writes that concepts of "colonizing 'others'" and "'enslavement" by the Manchus became "an interpretative instantiation of modernity" and "China's situation was firmly connected to others around the world, whose individual and collective struggles would help redefine the world." See Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, 147.

quandaries include problems that continue to put pressure on social unity in China, such as a conflation of race, ethnicity, and nationhood gathered within the powerful Chinese term for both nationalism and pride in the Chinese nation, *minzuzhuyi*, and display what Rebecca Karl calls a "naturalization of the relationship between *minzu* [people] and nationhood" that is paradoxically marked by the "absolute displacement" of 'the people' from the actualization of the nation state."[204] Against this epistemological double bind, one that constructed modern China as linked to imperialist fantasies that ultimately worked to its detriment, Mao Dun's call for a literature of the masses saw the contradictions written within the modern concept of the people as a dialectic of history rather than an internal flaw or fissure that could compromise a collective future. The looming problem for Chinese society is thus to be pulled back into the eternal return of the masses divided and in conflict dominated by a metaphysical ideology of China "transmitted from the origins of time."[205]

As Mao Dun reached his creative peak in the late 1920s and early 1930s, this critical concern with historical consciousness became intertwined with questions of media and technology. Even before he began to tailor his critical theory of culture to an interpretation of films and cinema technology, he published short pieces that attempted to synthesize mass culture with the rapid growth of technology in urban China. In critical statements on contemporary culture, for instance "In "Praise of Machines" and "Literature of the City," Mao Dun commented on the growth of audiences in what

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[204] Karl specifically locates this paradox in Sun Yat Sen's statements on China as a "perished nation" (*wangguo*) or country facing extinction—a term that becomes embedded in the rhetoric of nationalism in China throughout the early twentieth century. See Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, 138.

[205] Benedict Anderson, "Patriotism and Racism," *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 149.

Alexander Des Forges has, borrowing from Régis Debray, called Shanghai's "mediasphere." Mao Dun's prolific writing on culture was dispersed through a vast, interconnected print media network among numerous weeklies and dailies amid the exponential growth of a middle- and working-class audience of urban readers drawn to local trends in music, film and dramatic arts.[206]

By the late 1920s, Mao Dun's career as editor had entered a phase in which he moved from writing primarily for literary journals to a phase of writing directly to Shanghai's large media audience. At this time, he wrote numerous newspaper articles framed, somewhat deceptively, as simple meditations on everyday life, but which in fact contained unexpected philosophical interventions aimed at rerouting the fervid and chaotic energies of the urban commercial marketplace into a collective awareness of the way the energies of capitalist modernity could be adapted to communist social movements. In doing so, he hoped to turn the unorganized desires of this audience towards understanding the present moment in its specific material relationship with the past and future. Thus, his critical work in this seminal period may best be viewed as setting a rebar of a reflexive critique within the political foundations that were being laid by the CCP. The recognition of the power of mediated representation rests, moreover, on a reevaluation of what has frequently been termed "realism" in his work.

Erasing the Lines between Art and Work: Realism or Art as Praxis?

In the 1958 essay "Occasional Notes on Nighttime Reading," Mao Dun wrote that "realist literature is always full of the spirit of optimism, it is enriched by the indomitable will to

[206] Alexander Des Forges, *Mediasphere Shanghai: The Aesthetics of Cultural Production* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 17.

live."[207] The volume was written in the first decade of the new CCP government and it shows the author taking on the role of a venerated and experienced literary critic. Widely read in China as a part of college curriculum in studies of modern literature, the essay is considered an important retrospective consummation of Mao Dun's theories of realism. It reads as a triumphant survey of the reasons behind what the author saw as the failures of movements in Western modernism to expand the definition of literature and the arts in Europe and the United States. With the CCP ostensibly embracing the imagery of the proletariat, as well as staging campaigns to identify and collect folk arts of former peasants, the writer was no longer confined to attempts to convince a conflicted audience of the advantages of mass forms of culture over bourgeois conceptions of art.[208] Within this context, Mao Dun made enthusiastic predictions for the direction of literature in the future of the communist state by placing a China undergoing vast changes at the forefront of artistic creation in the world at the second half of the 20th century.

As the title suggests, Mao Dun had largely retreated from writing fiction and had set about composing notes that reflected upon decades of his own reading. However, the form of the piece as "occasional writing," or a series of collected but unstructured notes, is quite deceptive in that rather than loosely organized responses to leisured reading, the

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[207] "Yedu Ouji: Guanyu Shehui Zhuyi Xianshizhuyi ji Qita," Mao Dun Quanji (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1996), Vol. 25: 160.

[208] Although support for popular and folk arts was part of official CCP policy with regard to cultural life in the PRC, the history of early forms of art for the masses was also a complicated problem that brought to light lapses between policy and reality. This difficulty has been discussed by numerous art historians working on the post-Civil War period in mainland Chinese history. For the most comprehensive study n English of instances specific to literature, theater, and the performing arts, see the edited volume *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, ed. Bonnie McDougall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), especially the essays in Part II, "The Push to Popularize." Maria Galikowski describes the contradictions entailed in the official position on popular art across many aesthetic forms in *Art and Politics in China, 1949–1984* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1998). See, for example, her fascinating explanation of the way that New Year's or *nianhua* prints disrupted the production of traditional woodcut arts. See Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China, 1949–1984,* 25-28.

essay consists of a comprehensive synthesis that formed something like the capstone of Mao Dun's previous three decades of critical writing. Among other conclusions, his analysis links realism to a concept of "life" that had been evolving throughout his writings. It is neither an allusion to basic drives of self-preservation nor an attempt to suggest a connection to metaphysical universalisms situated in the self or mind. Instead, this concept of life as a collective and continuous project of mass culture within society was a simultaneous rebuttal of a hegemonic European philosophical discourse of the early twentieth century and a response to inherited political paradigms that linked terms of nation and race to survival and extinction. Upon the basis of the essay's critiques of concealed forms of idealism throughout European philosophy and culture, "life" became a term reclaiming the materialist basis of society elaborated into historical reality by the people.

Many decades earlier, at the very beginning of his career as an editor, Mao Dun concluded his response to the teacher's letter to *Fiction Monthly* with urgency and again making a specific reference to "life" as a principal theoretical touchstone. Countering his interlocutor's claim that notions of the popular must rest upon an empty abstraction, or worse, a myth of purity he writes of the "new phenomenon" of mass culture:

> It is natural to advocate a pure culture for literature at this difficult point of no return for our society, the unavoidable 'literature for literature's sake,' and the 'people for the people', but the Chinese, as a people, find themselves old and in decline unless this new phenomenon can bring us long life.[209]

He regards an idealism of purity of art and a purity of populism as equally flawed and, instead—even as early as his first position as an editor—he had begun to imagine a different concept: mass culture conceived as diverse and impure drawn from conceits

[209] Mao Dun, "Zenme Tiegao Minzhong de Wenxue Jinshangle?" 147.

through which readers could understand society as an aging body. Of course, such imagery was drawn from a popular discourse that had circulated decades earlier and later developed into metaphors of decrepitude, such as the "sick man of East Asia" (*dongya bingfu*), which portrayed a Chinese society in crisis under military and economic pressure from colonial powers.[210] Imagining the masses in the 1920s against the grain of a prevailing scientistic discourse, Mao Dun repurposed this imagery, of society symbolized as the body, in a way that could run counter to abstractions previously used to create a concept of the people as the masses within a society. In this way, his statements on life are posed directly against a metaphysical logic that underlay failed and misguided movements in populist politics in Europe in the early twentieth century.

Differing greatly from both the diffuse and chaotic mass that Georg Simmel imagines, or the mass organized and mechanized alongside Taylorist-Fordist modes of production through which Siegfried Kracauer analyzed the abstractions of stage productions in his reflections on the Tiller Girls, Mao Dun begins from the body—in labor and composed of individuals living closely and collectively—to describe mass culture as a dynamic involved in a physical rejuvenation of a society.

This conceptualization of mass culture as a life force is a way of favoring the arts and literature over the totalizing concept of "revolution" based in a structure of lack deep within Marxism and composed from an entirely different kind of metaphysics. "Life,"

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[210] In discussing the integration of scientism and metaphysics initiated by the influential Chinese philosopher Hu Shi in the first half of the twentieth century, Li Zehou traces the way that a notion of "saving the nation from extinction" (*jiuwang*)—especially in contrast to philosophy regarded as having the lofty universal goals sought by European enlightenment thought—drew upon Darwinism and other scientific discourses to create a connection between biological bodies and the social apparatus In the same essay, he describes the ways in which revolution and the saving of a life eventually became synonymous in the terms of scholarly debate in the 1920s and entered into the rhetoric of the political struggles that followed the failed 1927 "big revolution."
See Li Zehou, *Zhongguo Xiandai Sixianglun*, 87-89.

understood collectively as a historical property of a united social whole, was the bedrock of Mao Dun's understanding of literature. Not merely a figure of speech, but a semiotic axis along which Mao Dun outlined the possibilities of culture that could transform a society as through a gathered multitude that gained collective will. The same essay that equates realism with the "will to live" features a categorical denunciation of Henri Bergson. Mao Dun's continuing interest in theorizing human collectivity with a concept of "life" was developed alongside of and in response to Bergson's ideas on patterns of self-organization and consciousness, particularly those offered in Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1907).

Distinguishing this idea of life from Bergson's concept of *élan vital*, Mao Dun takes a staunchly anti-elitist stance while opposing all forms of thinking of consciousness in terms of an individual being. The critique sprang from Mao Dun's interest in replacing a tendency to think of the modes of political organization of twentieth-century society through the ideas of a hegemonic intellectual class and substituting this ideological habit with a more versatile concept of life rooted in a tangible expression of everyday collectivity. In writing retrospectively in the 1958 essay about a plethora of political predicaments arising from European philosophy's intractable fixation on the dualistic imbroglio of idealism and materialism, Mao Dun writes that Bergson was the most outspoken representative of the same philosophical foundation that produced Italian futurism and other cultural movements leading to fascism—what he calls in the essay "the modern schools."[211] Specifically, Bergson was the dominant philosophical voice of

[211] Mao Dun, "Yedu Ouji: Guanyu Shehui Zhuyi Xianshizhuyi ji Qita," Vol. 25: 176.

these traditions in the twentieth century and emerged as "the vanguard philosopher of modern schools."[212]

Mao Dun describes Bergson in a way that aligns with Gramsci's insights on the antagonisms between intellectuals underlying the processes of social change under capitalism. Although Bergson's philosophical project has recently been reevaluated in terms of an ecological turn, Mao Dun insightfully regards him as a representative of a European intellectual vanguard whose ideas were far removed from the movements of the collectivist labor politics, especially in contrast to leftist figures like Bergson's contemporary and proponent of rationalism, Jean Jaurès.[213] Mao Dun perceived the intelligentsia as a force maintaining capitalist modernity and establishing forms of culture within this as a bulwark against sources of instability.[214] Conversely, Mao Dun sensed a preeminent value in literature, especially conceived as a part of a rising tide of a more general mass culture with the power to surpass the intellectual classes that he felt would soon be eclipsed by radical social change. Moreover, in making a call for life as a form of knowledge uncoupled from a philosophy based in existential quandaries producing the worst abuses of power in European history, he begins to explore alternative worldviews that better fit China's reality.

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[212] Mao Dun, 176.

[213] For a recent interpretation of Bergson's thought that addresses the differences between materialism and Bergson's vitalism that also ties Bergson to a longer European philosophical tradition, see Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), esp. 62-81.

[214] The degree to which Bergson himself was influential to state power—for example his rising prestige in French and international circles that occurred with his election to the Académie Française in 1914—is irrelevant from this point of view. In fact, Bergson's conflicts with officials of the French Republic solidifies him within this hegemony, especially as a member of a marginalized ethnic group that could reflect the internal squabbles of groups involved in setting the objectives and limits of discourse in French civil society. See for example, the influence of Bergson's philosophy on Georges Sorel, Charles Péguy, Charles Maurras and Charles de Gaulle in Ellen Kennedy, "Bergson's Philosophy and French Political Doctrines: Sorel, Maurras, Peguy and De Gaulle." *Government and Opposition* 15, no. 1 (1980): 75-91.

In the 1920s, he represented the kind of figure who might supplant elite intellectuals influencing the direction of public life because they wielded enormous hegemonic power over civil society and thus over the mode of thought used to frame issues of humanism, sovereignty and nationalism worldwide. Mao Dun had become the model of a thinker who was, as Gramsci describes, "actively involved in practical life as a builder, constructor, organiser, 'permanent persuader.'"[215]

Thus, Mao Dun's development into the model of an early intellectual activist in China can be seen within a continuum: his work as a communist provocateur led to an editorial career that engaged him in the public role of a critic of culture. In this role, Mao Dun's readers frequently found him departing from the commonplaces of Marxist-Leninist thought brought wholesale into China by more dogmatic writers. His original thought is apparent as he makes the case for collectivity as a life-force through recourse to idioms of food and nourishment, or in arguing that laborers should embrace technology and technical knowledge as the domain of the working classes. His mode of persuasion thus consisted in an intellectual register within which the discursive boundaries between cultural life and biological life were rendered entirely porous. Such an approach was conceived in specific contrast to the mode of philosophy that he saw Bergson representing, which perceived culture as an outgrowth of flawed or myopic human logic and described an underlying unity between understandings of the human and the ecological.[216] The vital impetus that Mao Dun describes, by contrast, is not a natural or

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[215] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 10.

[216] In *Bergsonism*, Gilles Deleuze proposes a different reading of Bergson, that brings the ideas of Bergson and Mao Dun on the relationship between collective and individual intelligence into closer proximity: "For if we consider intelligence and sociability, both in their complementarity and in their difference, nothing yet justifies man's privilege...unless this kind of play of intelligence and society, this small interval between the two, is itself a decisive factor" Deleuze asks what is in this "interval" and offers: "Bergson's real

organic quality, but consisted of conscientiously remaking culture under communism in order to view life not as a constitutive essentialism lying outside of capitalism but rather as a term that could be reflexively defined as the masses moved towards immanent state of historical consciousness: what Mao Dun refers to in another essay as "the Big I."[217] In other words, for Mao Dun, life-giving qualities are not to be sought within nature, or through the signs of the natural that appear within culture, but rather must be consciously cultured in literature to create a tangible and physical connection between the body and the social whole.

The language of food created one way to discuss pointed political questions internal to Chinese social experience. However, on an altogether different level, it was through these metaphors combining taste and sustenance that he depicted the way desires and human willpower might be recognized, multiplied and intensified within mass cultural phenomenon. Human creativity, moreover, was considered as labor essential to life: culture within an expression of collective purpose of expressing reality in a way that is no longer distanced or alienated.

Such a viewpoint, moreover, inevitably led Mao Dun towards a reconsideration of technology as deeply connected to human life, part of a larger group of collectively

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answer is emotion" which "differs in nature from both intelligence and instinct, from both intelligent egoism and quasi-instinctive social pressure." See Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 108.

[217] In contrast to this view of human experience and meaning as socially determinate self-organization, Bergson thus evolution in the natural world as pre-existing within an "anti-logic," with foundations in phenomenon beyond or prior to forces like cause and effect. Thus, for example, that philosophy should encompass life in which "action is not predetermined" and all experience results from an "unforeseeable variety of forms, which life, in evolving sows along its path." Rather than creating new paradigms of vernacular language, logic and knowing as a social group grows in consciousness with respect to history, all this occurs in Bergson with "a character of contingency" and possibility which he calls "chance" or "choice." See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), 96-97.

conceived forms of creativity. This point of view, a merging of the machinic with the vital, highlights the differences in the vital energy diverges from the views of Bergson who, for instance, predicates many of his explications of the comic in his short text *Laughter* on the differences between the human and the "mere machine," constantly opposing his richer notion of "life" to the machine as its other that possesses only repetition and is only capable of a lifeless "automatism."

Rather than posing the human as the quantum of life force surrounded by inert technology, Mao Dun was aware that technology was becoming the matrix within which human social life (especially its future) must be perceived. From this point of view, technology is a field of knowledge within which labor and culture are integrated and harmonized, and machines the material forms within which is crystallized a history of human social relations.

In many of Mao Dun's fictional works, he was preoccupied with the traditional lives of farmers and rural artisans caught in conflict with twentieth-century capitalism; however, in his critical writings, his eye was forever fixed upon the realities of a future in which human social life would be defined by its relation to technology. From this point of view, his fiction appears in a different light, with economics as a discourse that mystifies human relationships with technology. What is supposedly a field of knowledge actually distorts the relationship between labor and culture. Leading to the final development of a theory that links life to culture in his work of the 1950s, in critical writings articulating a position on realism, Mao Dun's promulgation of a particular mode of writing connected to the technical is carried out as a countermeasure against such distortions. This position on writing as a means towards gathering fragmented forms of knowledge within the lived

experience of mass culture is underscored by his growing sense that literary realism is not a literary mode at all, but must be established as a constitutive praxis—as the very activity through which labor is wedded to a new form of worker's intellectualism that is, as he put it, "actively involved in practical life."

In a 1937 article in the newspaper *Shen Pao*, Mao Dun made his first declaration of the need for a realism based in Shanghai's specific urban conditions, describing it in a way that moved towards an active practice and beyond an aesthetic modality or creative sensibility. In fact, this essay depicted writing as a lived praxis as opposed to a circumscribed artistic practice. Here his discussion of realism again hinges on "life" as a key term, but in this case, the argument revolves around the life of writers themselves, which he views as in need of connection to labor, with such changes intrinsically forming a new approach to literature:

> At the present moment literature is indeed a reflection of...the life of a writer, now is the time that writers must be able to form an intimacy with groups involved in production, and then we can give the literature of this deformed city a new face.[218]

In this essay, in opposition to imperialist measures of domination that have left the city "deformed" by uneven development, Mao Dun issued a call for what he names "a literature of the city" (大都市文学). Invoking realism only to disavow the dictum that realism should always function as a "mirror" on reality, he disputed a formula for realism based on one-to-one mimetic representation of what a writer sees of life and instead argued that literature must take up life in a larger scope in order to exert the transformative power that is its reason for being. Because realism has collapsed under the weight of its own definition, he shifts focus to the need for a new group of intellectuals

[218] Mao Dun, "Dushi Wenxue," *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1991), Vol. 19: 423.

arising in close connection with production itself. Working-class intellectuals will remake the cultural facade of the city organically, in much same way that workers construct new buildings or longshoremen bring in goods. Thus, little by little, such a proletariat intellectual group would bring art to a vital immanence with the experience of reality of the Chinese people and consequently overwhelm the ideologies of imperialism. By closing the distance between the worker's life of labor and culture, working-class culture becomes active in the renegotiation of the relations of production. His essay describes the way that art reflecting life has in fact inadvertently participated in the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production in the cultural field, while he aims at an "intimacy" that would produce a mimesis of the urban that is fully reciprocal and self-reflexive.

Engaging in a critique of a "deformed city" in need of a "new face," he uses a metaphor of biological development to relate the absurdity of the conditions of inequality and rampant consumption appearing in the city. He begins by mimicking the enthusiastic tone of articles written by boosters of Shanghai in the city's many variety magazines: "China's number one big city, 'The Paris of the East'—Shanghai, 'developing' day by day," asking "where can this development be seen?" He proceeds to list the stock answers with mock naiveté that apes the tabloid journalism style of the day: "the population survey doesn't it say that the city has two million people? The population density, this is the number one symbol of development. And real estate prices are skyrocketing!..."[219] He goes on to describe a piece of farmland outside of the French Concession selling for 3000 yuan (almost 18,000 dollars in today's U.S. dollars).

[219] Mao Dun, 421.

He ends by saying there is something amiss. He pinpoints the idea of "development" (*fazhan*) as a central contradiction in direct dismissal of the Trotskyist argument of the advantages of uneven development. Of course, the term has long been problematically related to the concepts of modernity and modernization. Perry Anderson, for instance, suggested that defining modernization in terms of development was in direct conflict with Marxist interventions in temporality and history.[220] Mao Dun's critique resonates with Anderson's arguments, but is particularly remarkable because his dismissal of it preceded the more general use of the term as a watchword for Chinese economic success by nearly half a century. Culminating in the "Scientific Development" of Hu Jintao's regime, by the 1980s the preferred ideological lexicon in China had shifted under Deng Xiaoping from the Marxist "production" to "development" two decades later.[221] Somewhat eerily echoing what would become the express focus and aim of Chinese economic policy by the end of the century, Mao Dun writes: "Shanghai is 'developed,' but development has not produced a Shanghai with industry, instead it's a consumerist Shanghai with department stores, dance halls coffee shops and amusement parks!"[222]

His essay advocates new approaches to literature in which writers reinterpret the relations of production—constituting the "new face of the city"—by writing from within a focused awareness of the totality of productive forces—thereby forming an "intimacy"

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[220] "The history of capitalism must be *periodized,* and its determinate *trajectory* reconstructed, if we are to have any sober understanding of what capitalist 'development' actually means. The concept of modernization occludes the very possibility of that." Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution" *New Left Review* 144, no.1 (1984), 102.

[221] See Adrian Chan's painstaking explanation for the theoretical and political grounds of this shift in CCP propaganda and policymaking in *Chinese Marxism* (London: Continuum, 2003). See esp. chap Nine, "The Thermidorian reaction: a crisis of legitimacy," 173-188.

[222] Mao Dun, "Dushi Wenxue," Vol. 19: 422.

with the groups involved in production. This he contrasted with continuing to write in a way that merely reflects the abnormality of what he calls a "bloat of consumption," where this "bloat" must be considered in light of his constant reference back to what he sees as the food-like nourishment that forms of culture, such as literature, can provide.[223] His most adamant point is that such fiction of consumption has built a simulacrum and "replaces" the experience of urban life: "The jazz music of the dance halls replaces the noise of the factory, the patter of walkers on Avenue Joffre [Now Huaihai Road, in the French Concession] replaces the bustle of the docks."[224] Thus this change in the "life" of the writer meant instead of taking up the city in works that conjure the experience of consciousness in urban life, as writers Mu Shiying were doing in evocations of Shanghai's dancehalls and nightlife—following Marx, in a practice of literature that reflects not that the "conscious of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines consciousness."[225]

In order to capture the city in totality, as a set of material rather than purely aestheticized relations, writers must actively take part in social being at the level of production. Mao Dun describes this by saying that "opening up a new field of literature field first must mean opening up a new kind of life for writers."[226] In other words, seeking a new form of realism for modern Shanghai would first mean a radical change towards writers understanding their place among workers. Rather than work on their style of writing, Mao Dun insists that writers see their work as labor and through it, create

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[223] Mao Dun, 423.
[224] Mao Dun, 422.
[225] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), trans. S.W. Ryazanskaya (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 21.
[226] Mao Dun, "Dushi Wenxue," Vol. 19: 422.

relationships with their fellow workers. In a city and country where uneven development had become most outwardly visible—and most inwardly audible—in the foreign capital injected into Shanghai's lush mediasphere with the result of an urban soundscape replete with jazz and the noisy "patter" of crowds at play in the city, Mao Dun portrayed the crisis between everyday life of workers and existing paradigms of political economy. Specifically, for Mr. Lin in the "Lin Family Store," "forms of development turn into fetters."[227] However, the essay on literature and the city reiterated that rather than seeing this as the threshold of revolution, Mao Dun was interested in instituting a proletarian intellectual class to transform the very paradigm of relationships that constituted the superstructure.

Thus, in essays like "Literature of the City," readers found Mao Dun in a strained dialogue with Marx over the process of revolutionary change in the social order. Points at which Mao Dun, as a writer of fiction, becomes a pragmatic social theorist, are the selfsame points at which Marx used aestheticized figures of speech, for example stretching his rhetorical powers to their conceptual limit in descriptions of "consciousness" being explained only "from the contradictions of material life" but locating these within the "framework of the old society."[228] Mao Dun perceived inconsistencies in sections of Marx that gesture towards a theory of culture and relayed this in his newspaper articles.

Mao Dun did not see communism as a purely cerebral activity, nor was his communism circumscribed by Marxist gospel. His life as a writer had never been divorced from labor. In a way that was starkly different from the classical model of the

[227] Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,* 21.
[228] Marx, 21.

Chinese scholar of literature, coming of age during a boom in print media, he had carved out a niche as a working writer plying the commercial magazine trade. Mao Dun's career as a professional writer began with the arduous work of translating and summarizing an enormous range of "Western" literature past and present from Europe, Russia and the United States. Between 1924 and 1929, he reworked his articles into four monographs that painstakingly surveyed the conventions, styles and genres of European literature (*A General Survey of Western Literature*, *European Literature and the Great War*, *An ABC of Knightly Literature*—an overview of the historical concept of romance in European literature—and *An ABC of Greek Literature*). This was a labor to which Mao Dun was passionately devoted. Far from following arcane models of classical scholarship passed down through more than a millennium by China's elite, these works were ultimately practical, as the use of the English idiom "An ABC" for the title of a Chinese text suggests. Moreover, in this work, he employed a highly technical approach to writing—an interest in documenting publication dates, charting influences and schematizing the names and relationships of literary movements— while the research that Mao Dun put into writing the volumes also represented an informal program of post-secondary education for the writer. Although he did briefly attend a preparation program for Peking University in his teenage years, Mao Dun's formal education ended when he was 17 years old. Completing such a project during the first thirty years of his life is also a major reason that a community of scholars grew up around this assiduous polymath at the *Fiction Monthly*, which included authors Bing Xin, Zhou Shuren (Lu Xun), as well as Zhou's two brothers, Zhou Zuoren and Zhou Jianren.

In contrast to what Gramsci described as the “"traditional and vulgarized type of intellectual given by the man of letters, the philosopher, and the artist," Mao Dun had much more in common with the worker in the print shop than the “journalists, who claim to be men of letters.” Mao Dun engaged with a wide urban audience, rather than being beholden to a pure literature that functions to alienate large swathes of that audience while concealing the writers’ aspirations towards a bourgeois elitism.[229]

As has been recounted in numerous studies on urban modernism, in the 1920s and early 1930s, intellectuals around the world faced the seemingly limitless expansion of markets and the rapidly evolving forms of mechanized labor with uncertainty. In his 1908 essay on “The Stranger,” Simmel speaks of an entity within modern life that may best be read as a meditation on technological phenomena entering into daily life. Symptomatic of the simultaneous disconnection and mobility that characterizes modern city spaces, urban space *in toto* becomes a medium from which arises its own forms and content. Within this medium, the combinations of “distance and nearness” create a radical estrangement in place of intimacy and community.[230] Seeking a large public forum for his ideas, and writing from a vantage that closed the distance between art and labor by highlighting

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[229] Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 9.

[230] In his piece on “The Stranger,” as a preface and introduction to his text, *Soziologie*, Simmel sought to describe a paradigm that was beginning to structure space and human relations in modern life. As a dominant field of knowledge at the material basis of this paradigm, as well as a source of many of its discursive limits, technology increasingly resembles Simmel’s evocation of an entity that is ubiquitous in everyday life but nearly impossible to comprehensively classify or define. In this case, “the stranger” may be understood as a figure through which technology is personified to express a modern episteme of social and spatial relations. Following Simmel, technology could thus be reconceptualized as form of knowing that is “fixed within a particular spatial group… [with a] position in this group [that] is determined, essentially, by the fact that [it] has not belonged to it from the beginning, that [it] imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself.” As a (sometimes immaterial) spatial presence that creates the structures, modes of transportation and that is essential to the design environment of a city, technology correlates to a phenomenon that, as Simmel describes, “reveals that spatial relations are only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations.” Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 402-408.

technology as the very grounds upon which what Simmel sometimes calls "outer and inner stimuli" could be united, Mao Dun examined the technical as a synchronizing of human knowledge forms. In an article in Shanghai's major newspaper *Shen Bao*, he spoke out against a trend in 1930s Shanghai literature of writers rejecting technology based on a feeling of their "lives being dominated by a stranger."[231]

In his passionate embrace of technology in the spirit of what Marshall McLuhan would later call an "extension of ourselves," Mao Dun joined a number of other leftist artists of the 1920s and 1930s around the world, who, rather than face this rapid technological change with apprehension, pushed further into the technologically oriented aspects of modern reality to redefine the experience of life through art. Eventually for Mao Dun, as well as for artists such as Dziga Vertov in Soviet Russia and André Breton in France, this commitment would lead to taking up explore new ways technology could help an artist mindful of political and historical conditions to present reality with greater fidelity. For example, Vertov triumphantly proclaimed the existence of the "kino-eye" and called the filmmakers who experimented in the form "masters of vision, the organizers of visible life;" again invoking a kind of communist intellectual labor applied to mass culture, Vertov posed this praxis against the experience of reality in which seemed exhausted and colorless: "how many people, starved for spectacles, are wearing away the seats of their pants in theaters? They flee from the humdrum, from the 'prose' of life."[232] Breton's surrealism, a movement that would diverge greatly from Mao Dun's realist praxis in its declarations of aesthetic utopianism, nonetheless discovered the same

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[231] Mao Dun, "Jixie de Gongxian," *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1991), Vol 19: 401.

[232] Dziga Vertov, "Council of Three, 1923" *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 19.

imperative surrounding technology,[233] embracing machines in pursuit of an "absolute reality."[234] Realism was intimately linked to his interest in the growth of the human experience through technology; as such, his promotion of realism became a parallel cultural project of adapting and reinforcing the very perception of the real—no longer a style or genre, but a praxis opening up new definitions of life.

In the *Shen Bao* article, "In Praise of Machines," Mao Dun raised specific concerns over a recent trend of intellectuals expressing anger and indignation towards new technologies, especially those technologies that could replace human labor. He inveighed against a related problem: that works of literature take place in cafes or "garret houses," but "not with the machines in the big arteries of our city."[235] He envisioned a future in which machines will lead the charge of our literary circles," but explained that at the moment a growing number of writers in China have actually begun to express this aversion to machines as part of their writing, while simultaneously engaging in fiction that sought the human in formalistic experiments in interiority. In contrast, Mao Dun points out that technology is a necessary ingredient in modern realism:

> Our modern works of literature are not influenced by machines. Although machines now have a dominant role in our lives, to the point that they have an effect on our thoughts and feelings, nonetheless the literature that supposedly 'reflects our lives' resists machines and stands outside the door[236]

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[233] Both writers not only shared a fondness for manifesto writing but also affinity for elaborating upon "life" as a philosophical or at least metaphysical concept. Breton took this position on technology as part of his reaction to what he called, in his first Manifesto, the loss of "what is most fragile in life—real life." See André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 3.

[234] Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)," 13.

[235] His description also alludes to a self-absorbed literature of the elite, containing "too many depictions of out-of-work intellectuals grumbling inside their garret apartments (停子间)," Mao Dun thereby ties ineffective forms of realism—employed as a prescriptively defined technique—to an intellectual class who had become obsolete in the modern political economy had. See Mao Dun, "Jixie de Gongxian," Vol 19: 402.

[236] Mao Dun, "Jixie de Gongxian," Vol 19: 401.

Although Mao Dun never says who is responsible for this type of literature that "stands outside the door," the most likely culprits are the so-called "new sensationalists."[237] However, his reticence on this point implies that he was also criticizing his fellow realist writers rather than unduly focusing on writers of popular serial fiction. What is most intriguing is Mao Dun's sensibility of the ways in which machines expand the capacity of the human body and mind. He turns the question of alienation on its head by opening up technology as a field of knowledge of cognition and interaction. David Der-wei Wang also notes that this question concerning technology makes its way into the opening section of Mao Dun's novel *Midnight*, where the author vividly describes "the basic forces making modern technology possible." Wang writes that, in the novel, technological accents in the cityscape represent "linguistic registers of a new mode of knowing, desiring, and possessing."(60) Such instances in his fiction reflect an initial experimentation with a realism that incorporated what would grow into a full critical commitment by the late 1930s.

Above all, Mao Dun's defense of technology, his welcoming of its influence upon art, draws on Marxist economic logic, which directs attention away from the machines themselves, and the technological determinism to which this would lead, and towards the way that modern capital employs machines to manipulate labor in order to create precarity: machines are outward manifestations of an underlying exploitation of labor in a

[237] Mao Dun did not specifically single out writers associated with this movement, but other leftists would declare only the following year that the "New Sensationalism" movement had ended (see Tang Na "Qingsuan Ruandianying Lun (1934)," in *Sanshiniandai Zhongguo Dianying Pinglun Wenxuan*, ed. Chen Bo (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 1993).

"system that manipulates machines to produce unemployment."[238] In an eloquent declaration of the possibility of a literature of technology that lies beyond alienation that many felt they were facing with the ubiquity of machines in daily life, Mao Dun writes:

> The machines themselves are becoming more powerful, innovative, and more beautiful. We shouldn't write off the greatness of the machines themselves. In this moment in the present era, very few people make themselves masters of machines and most make themselves slaves of the machines, this is truly a despicable system, but machines themselves should not be held responsible for this crime.[239]

This final call for a machine aesthetic, a realist aesthetic that integrates the outward beauty and the intrinsic creative potential of technology, contains an unusual provocation. Mao Dun invokes the logic of the irresolvable Hegelian double bind of Master and Slave as the basis of the apparent autonomy of machines within capital. In doing so, he is linking technology to Hegelian discourses on consciousness. In referencing the paradoxical relations between mastery and slavery, he indicates that dependence on technology is a reversal in which writers discover within themselves a unique form of labor. Namely, that the work of reinventing realism with the immediacy modern life hinges upon a dialectical relationship with machines through which technology can tell human beings more about their own selves. That is to say, mastering machines through technical knowledge makes humans privy to a mode of creativity and beauty that has the power to reflect back upon and even to transform human consciousness.

Just as his recurring criticisms of realism as direct—rather than active—mimesis demonstrate, his fiction took experimental turns that are difficult to account for within a rigid understanding of realism. Most notable in this regard are speculative works of historical fiction, "The Great Swampland," "The Leopard-Faced Lin Chong" and "Stone

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[238] Mao Dun, "Jixie de Gongxian," Vol 19: 402.
[239] Mao Dun, 402.

Tablet," published in *Fiction Monthly* in the early 1930s, written during what was likely a period of great disillusionment for the author over the future of his participation in the Communist Party in China. These stories exhibit an interest in the way reality appears in the very lapse that is caused as labor becomes entangled in the passage from the present moment to history. He writes of the ways in which abstract knowledge has a hidden basis in technical knowledge that merges mind and body, but which is ultimately obscured and forgotten in historical accounts. His exhortation for fellow writers to create a realism that did not merely reflect the "consumption" of their own reality is also a paradox quite characteristic of the writer. Mao Dun's statements on forging relationships between machines and artists thus attest to his commitment to establishing a vernacular whereby technology figured as the means of preserving a memory of the labor of the past against history's forgetfulness.

Mao Dun's approach to realism entailed considering reality with an attention to the way in which future notions of temporality could be shaped as it was rendered technologically, and simultaneously, displayed a deep concern over reality redefined as a shared experience of a mass public. (He did so by privileging the placement of narrative time over historical time in the experimental pieces, the first inklings of Mao Dun's interest in filmic modes of culture). More than just being a literary genre, realism lends continuity and coherence to his preoccupation with history as a fundamentally problematic mode of knowledge in modernity. Taking full account of Mao Dun's critical writing in his most active period as an editor (a more fitting term might be literary critic), from the mid-1920s through the mid-1930s makes clear that his theorizations of realism

should be understood as the development of a theory of art as a social praxis.[240] Much more than simply analyzing "realism," his theories propounded a practice of art and literature as mass politics and, eventually, a mastery of an array of technologies as a means of interrupting historical discourse through culture.

Mao Dun's critical writings established this germinal concept of realism and proceeded towards a praxis, which meant finding an orientation for this realism within related concepts of materialism and idealism. Through this frame—or rather discarding it as a bifurcation within European philosophy rather than a true dialectic—he construed realism as a practical task of interpreting the function of technique. Formally this meant concentrating on narrative and style, but was not limited to literature, and it led him to a curiosity about the technical basis of film and music recording. Such a critical task required the even more difficult theorizing of consciousness as a fictional representational space composed of time and interiority, within which culture and history intersect.[241]

Defining "realism" involved both theory and practice: as Mao Dun's texts on European literature demonstrate, much of his critical work actually involved a critique of

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[240] Taking up a slightly different line of argument, Li Rongqi, a researcher at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, has recently put forward a theory of Mao Dun's realism that resonates with my own claims. Li states that Mao Dun's realism is a form of art based on "a quality of distinct social praxis." Li Rongqi calls this a realism with "a quality of clear realization" ["鲜明的实现性"]. See Li Rongqi, "Lun Mao Dun de Xianshizhuyi de Wenxueguan," *Chongqing Shehui Kexue* 152, no. 7 (2007).

[241] Mao Dun was presented a way of thinking about culture that confronted the failures of the Euro-American modernism that, at its most excessive, was an aesthetic paradigm that British Marxists like Terry Eagleton viewed as a kind of extreme dwelling on the theme of consciousness conditioned by capitalism. Eagleton described the modernist as an artist "brooding self-reflexively on its own being, it distances itself through irony from the shame of being no more than a brute self-identical thing." Incidentally, Eagleton's description matches quite well with the brooding protagonists of Mao Dun's very early attempts at fiction in a European modernist style in the *Eclipse Trilogy*. The realism that Mao Dun advocated as the cornerstone of a culture underlying Chinese modernity was a coming to self-consciousness that more closely recalls the integration of history and consciousness in Hegel's philosophy. See Terry Eagleton, *Against the grain: Essays 1975-1985* (London: Verso, 1986), 140.

the philosophical basis of European and American literary trends. Figuring out a realism for Chinese modern literature was part of a larger process of understanding what constituted collective social reality to capture China's particular mode of representation. A crucial intertext to understanding the discussion of realism intrinsic to China's leftist writing circles is Qu Qiubai's 1932 essay, "Marx, Engels and Realism in Literature," which is directly cited by writers like Tang Na, who worked alongside Mao Dun as journalists in the popular press. It also contains paradigms for describing realism that are alluded to indirectly in Mao Dun's own work.

Mao Dun and Qu Qiubai were close friends and colleagues since 1923, when Qu Qiubai was the head of the department of Sociology at Shanghai University and Mao Dun took a position lecturing on fiction in the Chinese Literature department. The two became extremely close when Qu was selected during the summer of that same year as a member of the leadership committee of the Communist Party and the two met regularly about party business. Their relationship continued for many years. Qu Qiubai was the first major writer to publish a lengthy analysis of Mao Dun's novel *Midnight*.[242] Many of the elements of Qu Qiubai's influential text on Marxism and realism are picked up in Mao Dun's theorizations of realist approaches. For example, following Qu, Mao Dun took up idealism as a philosophical basis of anti-realist literature and further elaborated this insight within broader historical and social structures. While arguing for an "objective realism" within the work itself, Qu Qiubai writes, "[Marx and Engels] said that works with 'a shallow bias', works [based in] 'private self-interest' are 'a subjective literature of

[242] Zhang Kaiming, "Qu Qiubai yu Mao Dun de Jiaowang" [The Association of Qu Qiubai and Mao Dun], *Bainian Chao* 5, (2003), 64-65.

idealism'."[243] He notes that this idealism is in conflict with working-class literature with a material basis that leads away from the self and towards collectivism:

> the thinking of capitalist writers resists a dialectics of materialism, or it misunderstands this type of new methodology. All along they are not able to understand the struggle of the working class or its objectives, unable to understand the common masses (平民群众), and especially not the people of the proletariat, the models and personality [types], especially the new style of collectivist hero.[244]

He continues on to note that the materialist mode of writing, entailing direct engagement with an outer world of objects, is the only approach "adding to our understanding of the internal contradictions of the development of society."[245]

Qu Qiubai's account reflects the basis of the evolving discourse on realism within Chinese national culture in which Mao Dun was working. From these rudiments, Mao Dun began to theorize realism as representing reality in terms of historical agency and consciousness leading eventually to his interest in the evolving technological basis of forms of artistic representation: if society was approaching a state of modernity as collective consciousness, what medium would be most suited to evoke the experience of a commonly shared history? How does a depiction of reality itself become a moment of transition—a catalyst or synthesis of revolutionary populist politics—into future formations of social collectivity, especially by its manifestation in cultural forms tied to mass politics and within the materiality of representation themselves? Of course, these

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[243] Qu Qiubai, "Makesi Engesi he Wenxueshang de Xianshizhuyi," *Qu Qiubai Quanji*, (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1954), Vol 4.: 1015.
[244] Qu, "Makesi Engesi he Wenxueshang de Xianshizhuyi," Vol. 4: 1015.
[245] Qu, "Makesi Engesi he Wenxueshang de Xianshizhuyi," Vol. 4: 1015-1016. Crucial to Qu's analysis in "Marx, Engels and Realism in Literature," is the formulation—based on his reading of Marx and Engels' letters to writers of their own time—that subjective literature is based on the private subject of the self or the "private mind" [私心] as opposed to a literature primarily concerned with the collective and public realm of objects. The former is aligned with idealism and subjectivism in his viewpoint and the latter with a historically-bound and objectivist dialectic of materialism. See "Makesi Engesi he Wenxueshang de Xianshizhuyi," *Qu Qiubai Wenji*, 1015-1030.

questions were generally raised out of a Marxist framework of class consciousness and the mode and means of production, as they are in Qu Qiubai's text on realism. Moreover, these questions were the theoretical impetus behind the communist strategies to insert party agents within both popular theater and film productions. However, in Mao Dun's critical texts, they are formulated in ways that notably diverge from Marxist doxa.

During the first half of the twentieth century in China, there was no agreed upon term for realism, as was the case with many emerging concepts in the arts and social sciences. Instead, several words had been either invented or transliterated from foreign texts. In his earliest manifesto as an editor at *Fiction Monthly*, only two years earlier, in he repeatedly used the term *xieshi* (写实), or *xieshizhuyi* (写实主义), for realism. Employing this formulation for realism in the first manifesto in *Fiction Monthly* in 1923, he wrote that the editors believed that in order for "realist" literature to be adopted in China "the term must be imported/introduced as a first step."[246] His statement reflects the term's origins in foreign aesthetic practices. The 1925 essay on "Proletarian Arts," however, is an early instance of a term "realism" that Mao Dun would come to utilize exclusively throughout his later critical writings, *xianshi* (现实), or *xianshizhu* (现实主义).

Both terms can be used interchangeably to refer to realism in art or literature, however the term *xianshi*, while literally meaning reality or realistic, also has a connotation of expressing or achieving reality. Additionally, in other contexts this term can carry a dual meaning falling closer to "practical" or "putting into practice." Mao

[246] Mao Dun, "'Xiaoshuo Yuebao' Gaige Xuanyan," *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1989), Vol. 18: 56.

Dun's early use of this term captures the way that debates among Chinese intellectuals sought a highly peculiar inflection that was particular to the aesthetic demands and social context of China.[247] In a subsequent essay for *Literature* magazine in 1925, in which he further develops the ideas in "The Proletarian Arts," Mao Dun uses the new term and he deploys wordplay to create a definition for a realist literature integrated within mass culture by embedding the new term for realism within the definition for itself. He writes: "literature must be that which expresses human life as reality" ("文学确是如实地表现人生的").[248] The word for "realism" that Mao Dun comes to use, *xianshizhuyi*, is incorporated within this phrase, combining parts of the words for "reality" and "expression" in what becomes a declaration of the ultimate objective for art in society: realism not as reflection but as praxis—an act of expressing human life *as* reality, not reality as human life.

A comparison with a thinker who was probably his closest counterpart outside of China, and a figure who was also a thinker deeply invested in coming to a conclusive concept of realism—Hungarian Marxist literary critic Georg Lukács—brings the unique political and theoretical overtones of Mao Dun's move from realism towards an understanding of art as praxis into sharper relief. Both writers shared an attention to the relationship between Marxist economic theories and European literary history through which they came to an understanding of the historical origins of realism. At the level of

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[247] Qu Qiubai and Chen Duxiu were prominent mainland Chinese writers also involved in this debate. Among the most salient points of debate involve the invocation of terms and phrases that Mao Dun also coupled with realism, such as "[art] for human life" (为人生)—as is seen in the quote at the beginning of this chapter and is recalled in my own discussion of Mao Dun's work as a writer and editor throughout the first section. Also, terms like "modern(ism)" and "people's [art/literature]" (民族) frequently come into play.

[248] Mao Dun, "Wenxuezhe de Xinshiming," *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1989), Vol. 18: 539.

specific texts, both authors even use identical terms to frame their arguments, for example, each warns of the political regressiveness of a seemingly innocuous, but nonetheless socially destructive, "anti-realist" art. In addition, in roughly contemporary texts from the 1950s retrospectively analyzing modernism, both writers also draw an opposition between what they each term the "modern schools" and countervailing traditions of realist literature. Because of these striking similarities, major differences between the two stand out even more clearly, highlighting that Mao Dun was uniquely invested in a notion of praxis distinct from even his closest European intellectual analogue.

In an essay on modernism, "The Ideology of Modernism," from a volume translated as *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Lukács gives one of the clearest accounts of realism to be found in any of his written work. In the essay, he employs a comparison—rendered in extremely general terms—between what he saw as "modernist schools" (selecting James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Thomas Wolfe, and T.S. Eliot, among others, as representative examples of the types of writers he was describing) and realism (whose main representatives include Thomas Mann, Leo Tolstoy and Flaubert), to establish the premise that "modernist schools" have been compromised by a bourgeois ideology in which the individual is "solitary, asocial and unable to enter into relationships with other human beings."[249] Against this counterexample, realism stems from a worldview that seeks to portray the human in its actual state, namely, as a "zoon political," a political animal.[250] He comes to this conclusion based on observing that in

[249] Georg Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism,* trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963)*,* 397
[250] Lukács, 397.

realist works, especially in the cases of the writers he refers to, representations of individual consciousness are bound to greater social and historical forces. He writes that, in this fiction, "individual existence...cannot be separated from...social and historical environment" (396).

In contrast to Lukács's view of an individual depicted *within* a historical context, Mao Dun's realism-as-praxis is predicated on the ways in which modern history is fundamentally irreconcilable with individual consciousness. The lapse created within this radical disjuncture opens up the possibility of social change: in order for the expression of the conditions of human life to take place, reality—itself constituted by the discourse of history—must be disrupted. Thereupon, art conceived of as an image of collective social activity takes as its material the conflict of the dialectical forces produced from seemingly opposite appearances of reality (frequently, these were nominally idealist and materialist forces in Mao Dun's own fiction). Moreover, as Mao Dun's early experiments in literature show and, as he continued to explore through his interest in the medium of film, fictional narrative possesses a unique potency in that it can throw reality into new and uncertain light and reveal unexpected directions for human action. The reality an artist's praxis depicts is actually neither idealist nor materialist, but is an inchoate space ruled by paradox wherein deception reveals truth. Take, for example, the conclusion to his celebrated story "Spring Silkworms": With the final loss of the harvest's value in the macrocosmic conditions of global capital, Mao Dun uses everyday characters, bewildered and torn by the simultaneity of opposing appearances, to reveal a precarity that exposes "the will towards life" as manifest in the social being. Only fiction that destabilizes a fixed and linear history, revealing paradox as its basis, could glimpse this will as the

redemptive and irreducible presence of collective life amidst the wreckage forgotten by history.

From his early literary theory written in the 1920s and continuing into his observations on film, Mao Dun formulated realism as a praxis that exceeded literary genres, schools or sets of stylistic conventions. Finally, in articulating realism in a way that was intimately connected to history and technology, the writer viewed art as a social praxis within every human environment and a means towards experiencing a reality specific to modernity. As such, Mao Dun's realism as praxis was an alternative to the problematic foundations of European philosophy that had been embraced in China since the May Fourth Movement and its promulgation of European and American political and scientific philosophies.

In the 1925 essay in which he employs the new term *xianshi*, Mao Dun points to this alternative by complicating basic assumptions about realism. Significantly, Mao Dun employs a technological figure of speech to describe this alternative realism and, moreover, an image drawn from China's past, to describe literature's effect within collective social life. Departing from stock-in-trade metaphors that compared realist literature with a mirror—which even he had employed in earlier writings in defense of European-inspired realism—he supplants this viewpoint with another potential quality of realist literature in modern China: "literature should certainly not be merely a mirror, it should be the needle of a compass."[251] Extending the logic of this metaphor to Mao Dun views of history and social being, individual consciousness is buffeted into an uncertain future by the forces of numerous conflicting drives and pressures. Meanwhile, realist art

[251] Mao Dun, "Wenxuezhe de Xinshiming," Vol 18: 539.

and literature becomes a substance that—like a magnetized needle—shares in these forces, while it is nonetheless distinct from them—and is, in fact, activated by these forces—thereby becoming an active tool that distinguishes among them.

Mao Dun follows up what he sees as the paradoxical logic of a compass-like realism that would guide a society by discussing necessity of idealism to a literature that is simultaneously negated by the inherent problems of idealism for interpreting the present or future. He writes that the image of an ideal society is "extremely hard to determine...but it must be thoroughly stated that there cannot be one single definite answer [to this question and] every person has the ideal world that they prefer and seldom will the two coincide."[252] He goes through famous examples of visions of ideal societies including Plato's "Republic," Bakunin's "Great Harmony" and Chinese poet Tao Yuanming's the "Peach Blossom Spring," but explains that instead of adopting one vision, all in a society must work to contribute their own visions of a desired world and, in the process, all ideals will merge into collective picture. Thus, this realism does not negate idealism *tout court*, but draws upon a power that coalesces when ideals combine. Describing the way in which he envisions this sharing of ideas, in which a society—a state—will be attained through a form of mass consciousness, he writes: "in the entity of the multitude the little Is are joined and become the big I."[253]

"The big I" represents the culmination of art as social praxis and the collective historical consciousness of the masses. Attaining such mass consciousness would not only bring reality into focus, in unity and coherence rather than the confusion that resulted from individuation, but through this "big I," past, present, and future come to

[252] Mao Dun, 540.
[253] Mao Dun, 540.

have meaning. In a Hegelian register, in contrast to Marxist theories of class consciousness, this would be "the State," and for Mao Dun—as well as for Hegel—it is only within such an integration of social being that knowledge is possible, "rationality—is objectively there for them as knowers."[254] Thus, rather than being a realism perceived as capturing an individual within the social field of history, as Lukács has it, Mao Dun envisions realist techniques in cultural production as merely one feature, albeit a critically important one, of the collective cultural life of the multitude. Realist cultural forms seek integration of all members and classes of society and, as such, according to Mao Dun's point of view, one mass historical consciousness will organize all the contradictions of agency, perspective and temporality that make social reality viewed from an individual standpoint impossibly and staggeringly complex.

Writing as a kind of participant-observer, with great expertise on European literature and drawing on personal relationships he formed with the Chinese writers he studied, Jaroslav Průšek was the first foreign critic to publish scholarship on Mao Dun outside of China and the first to fit Mao Dun's fiction within a frame of realism. Beginning in the early 1940s, in his analyses of modern Chinese fiction, he appraised Mao Dun's writing as an ineffective attempt at realism and, in many ways, his analysis set the tone for foreign scholarship on Mao Dun for decades to come. Although Průšek made great headway in carrying great swathes of Chinese literary sensibilities to European and American readers, his heavy-handed comparisons of the author with writers like Balzac fail to identify what made Mao Dun's fiction so moving to Chinese readers in his own era and beyond. Průšek sums up what he sees as Mao Dun trying to

[254] G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1988), 41-42.

create as a "true picture" of society, within which reality amounts to nothing more than "a sum of individual facts."[255] David Der-Wei Wang went to great lengths to establish new sightlines of studying realism in early 20th-century China that push against treating literary form exclusively in comparison with European and American paradigms.[256] Wang's conclusions are drawn from rich historical detail and show that for Mao Dun the act of writing itself was always a contingent effort linked to political paradigms and, within this, to contemporary debates with other radicals. Wang comes very close to describing the writer's work in terms of a self-conscious praxis when he writes that for Mao Dun "realism is not so much a promise as a pact, pointing to aesthetic, cultural, and ideological terms of writing and reading the real."[257] Yet, Wang's interpretation is still anchored in the term for realism that Mao Dun ceased to use in the mid-1920s (*xieshi*)—as an activity of writing within discourse, as opposed to one with the potential to disrupt it—and thus does not breach the new problems that arise as Mao Dun began to explore realism as praxis.

Finally, further elaborating the more nuanced view of Mao Dun that David Der-Wei Wang initiated, one of the more recent critical studies of Mao Dun's work disputes previous theories of realism in order to more comprehensively identify the writer's specific concern with the body (a theme I have traced only superficially above). With an

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[255] Jaroslav Průšek, *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 92-93

[256] Wang's work comes closest of any critic to what I argue is a necessary condition for analyzing Mao Dun's work, in that his on artistic expression, mimesis, and literary tradition must be considered light of the standard of sinocentric comparativism that he established and must also account for his deep investment in anti-imperialism. The title of Wang's book *The Lyrical in Epic Time* is both homage and riposte to the general thematic set down by Průšek's earlier text.

[257] David Der-wei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 13.

eye towards the recurrence of dreams in the author's fictional works, Roy Bing Chan explains that the terms by which realism is composed by Mao Dun is beset by a psychological tension that is evident in an ambivalence: one the one hand, Mao Dun defends realism with great passion; while, on the other, the depictions of reality seem to be compromised by glimpses of the subconscious life of his characters, often even entering into moments of outright fantasy and dream. Accordingly, Roy Bing Chan calls Mao Dun's careful management of the division between the real and the dreamed "a balancing act between different modes of critique and fantasy" which produced a "psychic and narrative strain" a realism in a "hysteric mode" of crisis between body and psyche that is "vulnerable to instability as it searches for representational equilibrium."[258]

Chan perceptively reveals terms constructing the body, as well as the expression of gender in relation to these terms, as sources of instability and anxiety in all of Mao Dun's texts: a crucial reminder that every allusion to the body—whether this be the urban worker's body, the body of the revolutionary, or the body of a member of the petty bourgeoisie—is an element within a conflicted field of meaning. Working internally from the formal elements of Mao Dun's fiction, Chan's reading recognizes the vibrancy and excitement, as well as the political stakes, that contesting European paradigms of realism offered to writers in 1920s and 1930s China when, in the terrain of literature, style meets worldview.

Understanding Mao Dun's critical thought as an insistence on art as social praxis also calls attention to the internal contradictions within the process of social change that made revolutionary politics unthinkable—but this was exactly the same logic behind Mao

[258] Roy Chan, *The Edge of Knowing: Dreams, History, and Realism in Modern Chinese Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 76.

Dun's attraction to paradox as the structuring logic of human experience. Far from being an apologist for any one approach to writing, Mao Dun was closely attuned to literature in its mode of production. For example, in one extended analysis of the history of literary forms worldwide, he remarked that instances of realism had in fact existed in Chinese culture "one thousand seven hundred years ago…but [that] without the invention of moveable type, without theater, newspapers or modern schools...the spread of a realism of the people was difficult."[259] Such statements show the author perceived realism as arising from technical and economic conditions, rather than being an ideological or aesthetic goal to be pursued in and of itself. Above all, his primary concern in his critical writings on literature and media was not the preservation of any kind of aesthetic (as can clearly be seen in his critique of examples of literature that experimented in mimetic realism, both in China and abroad), but a cultural praxis that linked labor with a plethora of cultural activities and technical knowledge forms, including, but not limited to, language, fictional narrative, dramatic performance and audiovisual media.

Finally, as befitting a realism that was not really a realism at all, but art conceived as social praxis, film was a medium that fit his outlook: produced by collective labor, a synthesis of technology within human perception and resulting in an art for a mass audience.[260] Importantly, however, art as social praxis meant film could not be seen from a viewpoint that reduced it to one technological essence: it was evolving, ever-changing, vulnerable to exploitation and misuse. This cookbook approach based on collective labor— including that of critic and audience—was the cultural ensemble that film

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[259] "Yedu Ouji," *Mao Dun Quanji,* Vol. 25: 133-134.

[260] Although his published work precipitously declined after the 1940s, many of Mao Dun's published pieces during these his later years were in fact comments on film, primarily films from the USSR.

became within Mao Dun's own lifetime and historical context. The point was not to understand the way that film could capture reality at the moment, but rather to fully understand what film could contribute to the gathering consciousness among the people comprising Chinese society. Thus, from Mao Dun's perspective, film in China in the first half of the twentieth century was moving towards a stage of the complete integration of individual and group, past and future, and thus might "fulfill Lumiere's great invention."

The patchwork of merging media of communication, arts and commerce of the Shanghai magazine world led to connections mutually beneficial to and further enriched by Mao Dun's heterogeneous notion of art. Therein, he engaged in a collective intellectual labor from which he attempted to argue for a specific approach to Chinese film that had an exceptional basis in praxis. The most notable example being his camaraderie with Xia Yan, which began with the review of the film *Kuangliu* (狂流). Xia Yan, in turn, wrote the screenplay of what would become a seminal leftist film based on Mao Dun's short story *Spring Silkworms*, a film containing documentary footage of silk farmers in Zhejiang and opening with shots of the text of Mao Dun's novel. This multimedia work—the film opens with a copy of Mao Dun's book presented on the screen as an actual text within which the story unfolds—represented the author's debut to film audiences. Although he did not participate in the making of the film, Mao Dun and Xia Yan would continue the close acquaintance that began with the film review throughout their lives. Very much in the spirit of the manifesto that Mao Dun composed in 1921, this film was criticism as one ingredient of a larger recipe of art as praxis. Despite being deeply anchored in the study of conventional literary texts, and exhibiting an irreproachable—even encyclopedic—understanding of world literary history, the

socially-engaged study of culture that Mao Dun endorsed retained a sharp focus on cultural forms relevant to the present moment. Through critical interventions launched around the theorization of film, he would gradually introduce a mode of critical media analysis, in embryo, into literary studies.

Fulfilling Lumière's Great Invention

Summarizing his reflections on film as an art form in 1936, and instead of looking at film within a history of related aesthetic form, Mao Dun begins by looking at film within a technology-shaped historical context. This approach exemplifies his primary concern with considering the entirety of the effect of an art on social life and cultural forms, while it also attests to his sensitivity towards film as an independent medium, which could then be perceived in its social construction. He emphasized that the origins of film as an instrument developed within scientific practice, citing Louis Lumière, who he calls a "French scientist," and Eadweard Muybridge. Accordingly, he also notes that Lumière had later invented a "three-dimensional stereoscopic cinema apparatus" as part of his scientific work.[261] The fact that Mao Dun expresses unusual interest in the three-dimensional device indicates that he is tying film technology at this early stage to the capacity of the medium to capture and recreate the sensations of life (his attention to Muybridge's experiments in recording animal motion further on in the piece also support this). His subsequent focus on "the history of film" is not an attempt to define what film essentially is, or how it had grown out of supposedly more primitive uses from a narrative or fine art, as was often the case in film histories of this period. Instead, he wrote with an

[261] Mao Dun, "Dianying Faming Sishizhounian," *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1991) Vol. 21: 107.

eye towards analyzing the aesthetics that has grown around film as technology. In this account, he pays closest attention to the fact that this is a use of technology with an unparalleled capacity for reproducing an effect of reality and, moreover, that part of this reality effect is determined by the social context within which the medium emerged. He also dwells on the fact that this technology is unusual because it has frequently been used to produce contrary—illusionist—cultural forms.

Mao Dun thus puts a strong emphasis on the ways that film technology had been used by Hollywood as an "anesthetic"—as a means of weakening and distorting the experience of life. He characterizes "anaesthetic" sensory experience with the phrase "soft breasts and jade thighs." In his historical sketch, "anesthetic" is a play on words, with the double meaning of the inversion of an aesthetic. In her work on mass cultural phenomenon in the same period in the European, American and Russian context, Susan Buck-Morss identifies the same affective phenomenon as the predominant form of reception among audiences beginning in the nineteenth century and making way for a powerful entertainment economy of the twentieth century.[262] Mao Dun views this taking place in much more immediate way and, of course, without all of the corrective benefits of hindsight. His essay likewise explains the irony that impressions left by the bodily effects of this cultural form are deployed to create a sensation that opposes reality, usually with a political outcome. He describes the uses of film as overstimulating the senses of working people to numb them for continued exploitation. He follows with a

[262] Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anesthetics," *October* 62 (Fall 1992): 3-41.

statement that implies a connection between this simultaneous stimulation and exhaustion and Hitler's use of films as "a tool to enlarge his own persona."[263]

Shifting his attention towards film technology in China, he notes that the country has yet to produce films that move beyond a "superficial sentimentalism"—a statement that does not contain a condemnation, or even a voicing of disappointment, but instead shows that he considered this point from another vantage. Mao Dun saw China's nascent film industry developing a film technology in which it could begin to work on the senses to great social and political effects. He writes that "China is coming to a stage which will exhibit a boundlessness of "great material" and he concludes by implying that although films being produced have only a "superficial sentimentalism," a greater delivery of emotional effects would eventually be possible, which he believed would will have the greatest force for audiences that were "illiterate" ("文盲" an idiom that, as in many languages, also conveys an additional sense of exclusion from culture more generally).

This short essay on the history of film makes clear that despite misgivings about specific instances in which film had been used to the detriment of the interests of a mass public, Mao Dun viewed the sensory effects of film technology positively for expanding national cultural life. He not only perceived the potential for a more inclusive mass culture through film, he also implies that the future of film lies in the cultivation of its audience. Thus, filmmakers need not merely innovate film form but, instead, need to look for ways that cinema reinvent the relationship between film and audience. He thus regards film as the art form that would embed itself within the vernacular culture of

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[263] "自吹自擂的工具," a more literal translation would be "a tool to toot his own horn and beat his own drum." Mao Dun sardonically mentions that an anecdote that criminals who were given the option of a sentence of films of Hitler as reeducation preferred hard labor to the films. See Mao Dun, "Dianying Faming Sishizhounian," Vol 21: 108.

China. He emphasizes that film must develop from an "entertainment tool" into an "educational tool," but, suggests that this will occur when film is developed in such a way that the mediation of written language is less important than film's "effect on our thoughts and feelings." Mao Dun's history of film's first forty years is thus written with an eye towards the future: he looks towards a form of mass culture that he had been seeking since his very first critical writings in the early 1920s.

In Mao Dun's review of the film *Wild Torrents* (1933, dir. Cheng Bugao), a film written by Xia Yan, he stresses that it is precisely at an affective register through which the vernacular realized by film technology conjures lived experience. Emotion and sensation are the material out of which messages in and of film are to be shaped.[264] In the review, he upsets the notion that melodramatic portrayals of romance and heroism are off limits as political fare, while attempting to show that even films that seemingly fall in line with leftist orthodoxy can be shallow and hackneyed. Moreover, just as the essay praising machines took up the theme of the alienation of modern urban life to turn the premise on its head, the review also exhibits the same logic of immanence that recurs throughout his critical writings. This is to say that his rhetoric seizes upon sources of pessimism and estrangement to reveal that the tools of social change, of coming to consciousness, are already present in the most unlikely of places.

Mao Dun's film review not only uses this same rhetorical strategy in its pattern of logical inversion, the review follows directly in spirit from this earlier article—presenting a case for the specific ways that a machine can effectively give an enriched expression of reality. The review is notable in this regard because it moves beyond the impasse of the

[264] Mao Dun, "*Kuangliu* yu C*hengshizhiye*," *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1991), Vol. 19: 399-400.

more simplistic terms of either technological determinism or blind ideological zeal that even dedicated film reviewers had often fallen into in the debates over "hard" and "soft" film in film periodicals of the of the time—terms that recall the master-slave binary that Mao Dun had earlier discerned in denunciations of machines.[265]

Instead, Mao Dun expresses a strong interest in the effects of cinema on the audience, while also maintaining a critical distance in developing its interpretation of the films, so that the text stands out as an exemplary early example of media analysis. Much like the film history piece, Mao Dun begins the film review with an express attention to film as technology. The film review demonstrates the ways in which his practice of criticism in the 1930s had come to be shaped by his conviction that writers should engage closely with technology. He thus begins by considering the "technique" (技术) of the films, a term that encompassed both film technology and the filmmaking craft.[266] Rather than dealing with the film as a form of storytelling that is a derivative of literature, his critical approach treats films as a synchronization of technology, artist and audience. Of course, this approach stems from the more general imperative in his critical writings to treat art and literature within the entire complex of collective and historical social creation. In terms of "technique," Mao Dun comments on the on the lighting and mise en scène in *City Night* (1933 dir. Fei Mu), a film that was released at the same time. He notes these aspects create an effect that "invites the urban audience in." He writes that *Wild Torrents* is composed of what he calls the "very difficult" material of the images of

[265] Huang Xuelei notes that reviews of the *Wild Torrents* were positive overall, but that numerous reviewers criticized the "frivolity of the romance" in the film. See Huang Xuelei, *Shanghai Filmmaking: Crossing Borders, Connecting to the Globe, 1922-1938* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 217.
[266] Mao Dun, "*Kuangliu* yu *Chengshizhiye*," Vol 19: 400.

the floods of two years past and the struggles of the people in response.[267] *Wild Torrents* was loosely based on the 1931 Yangtze floods, which are still held to be the deadliest natural disaster of the twentieth century, with possibly millions perishing over the course of several weeks.[268] Commenting on both films, Mao Dun reports that the two represented a change in style at Chinese studios towards political subject matter and social commentary, a development that certainly excited the writer.

Mao Dun then engages in an analysis of each film's "content" (内容) and gives a step-by-step comparison of simple differences in narrative form, from which he moves to comment on the ways in which each film offers a realistic expression of the conflicts involved in economic modernization in the countryside and the city. The review carries out the comparison through a detail-oriented outline of the two narratives. While in its attention to discrete formal structures Mao Dun's critical approach resembles Russian formalist critics like Vladimir Propp (and the evidence from Mao Dun's prolific critical writing suggests that although he was also devoting much time to Russian literature and criticism and may have even come across Propp's work), he seems to have independently and concurrently invented an analogous mode of reading particularly suited to cultural forms in the vernacular. During his tenure as editor for *Fiction Weekly,* Mao Dun had not only written several pieces on folklore studies and translations of folklore coming out of Europe and Russia, but he had also published a number of his own translations of folktales. Additionally, at the time the review was written, Mao Dun was involved in the

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[267] Mao Dun, 400.

[268] In the phrase "difficult material," Mao Dun is also likely referring here to the film's direct use of documentary footage from the floods. Laikwan Pang notes "spectators' interests in the flood footage which vividly documented the disaster" as a factor in the film's success. Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement*, 1932-1937 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 45.

project of creating new story forms out of some of China's most famous vernacular fiction of the pre-modern era, primarily the early adventure and martial arts stories of the Ming-Dynasty vernacular novel *Water Margin*.

Mao Dun's reading of narrative form in the film also attests to his recognition of film's specificity as a medium. Withholding judgment of the fact that each film relies heavily on a sentimental love story, he actually concentrates on these elements in his reading—relaying the way in which these audiovisual storytelling forms create a lexicon of codes readily accessible to a wide, and even "illiterate audience." Mao Dun breaks each film down into its components using this formalist analysis and thereby ascertains that the films' plots adhere to nearly identical formula of events.

He notes that in each a romance between a powerful character and another of lesser status forms the dominant chain of narrative—in *Wild Torrents* a female warlord's romance with a schoolteacher and in *Night in the City* a capitalist and a female worker—and that this foregrounds a conflict between "parents and children" ("'父与子'的斗争").[269] Not only does the steadfast leftist critic not belittle these love stories as bourgeois fantasy, he instead seizes upon details of the love story itself as terms for a systematic analysis of the way that the film medium simultaneously narrates and creates emotional effects. Moreover, the term he uses for conflict,
"斗争," that is most frequently applied to the struggle between the classes, suggesting that he sees the family relationships between characters in the film as a microcosmic portrayal of class relations. The implication is a highly anti-revolutionary one, in which class struggle takes place as a natural stage in the growth of a society, which should be

[269] Mao Dun, "*Kuangliu* yu *Chengshizhiye*" Vol 19: 399.

viewed allegorically as a family. The mode of analysis Mao Dun employs in this review is remarkable for the way that it differs from examples of leftist literary criticism that were most common in China from the mid-1920s through the 1930s, particularly in that these leftist critiques sought in representations of love one-to-one allegories for revolution.[270]

Mao Dun finds in *Wild Torrents* a seemingly prosaic romance that brings out qualities in the film's protagonists warranting emulation, and thus clearly defines a system of values, even in characters with few other redeeming qualities. The characters thereby "make the world morally legible" through the dark events of the story that reinforce the system of secular values they represent.[271] While the less-privileged schoolteacher is portrayed as having what Mao Dun calls "bright courage," Mao Dun also writes that the love affair brings to light an admirable zeal in the otherwise shallow female landlord, pointing out the deeper moral contradictions in a character who would normally be an easy target for ridicule in a left-leaning film.[272] In the analysis of the two films, the complex moral development of leading characters in *Wild Torrents* stands, for Mao Dun, in contrast to what he perceives as a "superficial humanism" in what at first appears to be the more profound love affair in *City Night.* The pretense of a connection to high culture is established from the opening scene of that film, which draws upon tropes of love affairs between an intellectual and a beautiful woman taken from classical Chinese literature. In making a comparison between the two films, Mao Dun's evaluation

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[270] For Mao Dun's comments on revolutionary literature exploiting sentiments of love, see the 1935 essay "'Geming' yu 'Lianai' de Gongshi" in *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1990), Vol. 20: 337-338.

[271] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 42.

[272] Mao Dun, "*Kuangliu* yu *Chengshizhiye*," Vol 19: 399.

identifies the tension between the evolving affective vernacular through which the medium could clearly render political realities to a mass audience and the countervailing push to create a highly aestheticized cinema legitimized by a connection to serious philosophy and traditional art forms.

While attempting a cinematic vernacular linked to melodrama, film form had to balance yet another demand: the necessary realism that is not only an expectation, but something more like a prerequisite in the public's eye, of a technologically reproducible art based on indexicality. Temporality is immanent within the medium of film and Mao Dun is highly sensitive to the way that effects of realism were expected to supersede boilerplate history for *Wild Torrents*, especially considering that the film's subject matter was the real-life events of such a major disaster for the nation earlier in the decade.[273]

Rather than showing the death of the landowner at the hands of the masses, which would have been the denouement *de riguer* of a leftist narrative, Mao Dun writes, in a way that quite vividly connects the scene to broader historical discourses, that the film instead depicts her drowning with a historical symbolism that evokes the "reek of feudalism as the inescapable net of heaven" ("不免犹有'天网恢恢' 的封建臭味").[274] Borrowing from the sacralized language of premodern Chinese literary tropes to describe a secular political quandary, Mao Dun evokes the way in which the film's aesthetics effectively dramatize crucial ethical questions involving China's unique experience of modernity. Mao Dun relates the way the film creates such a strong affective pull upon the

[273] In perhaps the best description of cinema's connection to temporality and history in the field of Film Studies to date, Laura Mulvey describes the ways in which films are embedded in time as the medium is not only based on time in terms of capturing recordings reproduced in frames per second, but as a preserved recording of a chemical reaction to light that materially links past, present and future. See Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 7-23.
[274] Mao Dun, "*Kuangliu* yu *Chengshizhiye*," Vol 19: 400.

audience that spectators can smell "the reek" of the problem wherein a population continues to be exploited according to the vestigial terms of an antiquated social order. Rather than launching into a excursus on the dire need for collective economic change, Mao Dun's review relates the way in which film can be the most direct way of communicating the deepest ethical imperatives of a society lacking the cohesion to break from the historical cycles of its past.

Drawing once again on the comparison between the two films, Mao Dun concludes by relating that *Wild Torrents* achieves a complex level of realism in its depiction of history in ways that the other film does not offer. He reaches this conclusion in a remarkably counterintuitive way: he notes that by virtue of not striving for a traditional mode of mimesis, *Wild Torrents* actually dramatizes the ethical terms of modernity by creating a set of visual effects around the images of the flood and that these images lead the audience to recognize historical contradiction. He juxtaposes this highly dramatic scene, one that is nonetheless rich in historical symbolism, with the idyllic ending scene of *City Night*, through which a new life in the country is heralded. However, in the scene in *City Night* he merely sees as monotonous reiteration of a popular leftist "slogan" that, when transferred to film, becomes completely unrealistic. As he explains, the floods and subsequent mass migration from the countryside to Shanghai demonstrated that "in general, the destruction of the countryside is an indisputable fact, and country villages are certainly not a paradise"[275]

Mao Dun's analysis reverses the assumption that a film produced with outright leftist political goals will necessarily speak for the exploited. Instead, his critique gives a

[275] Mao Dun, "*Kuangliu* yu *Chengshizhiye*," Vol 19: 400.

point-by-point analysis of the ways in which such a product of leftist revolutionary orthodoxy can fail to achieve realism and thus lose its effectiveness as a work of art. Mao Dun writes that by picking up a common slogan as its theme, the film echoes the pernicious ideological effects of a simplistic set of ideals. He thus argues that the film, like the revolutionary goals supported by the faction of the communist party pushing for a return to communal agrarian life, fails in that it inverts cause and effect. Mao Dun shows the immanent contradictions that produce such failures of realism as he describes how the film loses the opportunity to show the actual darkness of the city: in simply portraying the city as bad and holding that people must move to the country, he writes that the film in fact misses the opportunity to show a structural logic within which the very reason that the city has such a dark side is because the countryside is being destroyed. Such a statement was deeply relevant at a time when Shanghai was expanding rapidly, with hundreds of thousands of rural and small-town families moving into the city's tenements every year.[276] On one level, the piece captures the way in which problems of realism specific to film have consequences in the medium's representation of history. On another, through Mao Dun's adept formal analysis of narrative elements, in the contrasts and contradictions through which Mao Dun plumbs the deeper meanings of the films—a trivial love story revealing characters' true morality and as well, a film espousing a strong political fervor that reaches overly simplistic conclusion—the review reveals an interest in film as a complex art form of social praxis within which the effects of realism greatly benefit from the affective mode through which a film reaches an audience.

[276]See Frederic Wakeman, Jr. and Wen-hsin Yeh, "Introduction," *Shanghai Sojourners*, eds. Frederic Wakeman, Jr. and Wen-hsin Yeh (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992), esp. 1-6.

This focus on film's "technique" shows Mao Dun's interest in identifying an experiential vernacular that achieves realism in filmic representation. If films were to be "a tool of education"—this would not be a top-down didacticism, but a collective self-recognition in a shared public experience of a remaking culture. From this point of view, cinematic vernacular becomes irreversibly tied to technologically oriented realism. As Mao Dun had earlier hoped for in his writings on "The Proletarian Arts," film could reach the largest possible audience with a vernacular that would open up a space for self-recognition and consciousness of history. The failure of *City Nights,* in Mao Dun's eyes, highlights the ways that he perceived the ineffectiveness of the medium as a cultural form when it was only partially understood. In it, he observed an obsolescence that compromised a range of cultural forms, insofar that their mode of expression was predicated on seemingly logical or causal arguments, drawn from a rote political ideology, a tradition of philosophy or even just from a flawed body of conventional knowledge. Film technology, as an emerging modern vernacular, possesses an intrinsic quality that tends towards a richer consciousness of the relation of the present moment to history and the future than does either the storehouse of classical literature revered by the elite (decidedly not those who were raised eating mutton and onions) or the dogma of militant revolutionaries.

In analyzing the ways that subtle differences in Chinese left-wing films lead to vastly different political conclusions, Mao Dun was adjusting his theories of realism to vernacular audiovisual cultural forms. In the same year as the review of *Wild Torrents*, he also published an essay reacting to the preoccupation with fantasy in Hollywood, "Films of Gods, Spirits and Wild Beasts." Again, published for the wide audience of the weekly

Shen Bao, he examined a trend that was in conflict with the concept of realism he had been theorizing. Mao Dun looked at the films that were drawing the largest audiences in the early 1930s and saw how a vernacular art form could also offer a vivid audiovisual experience that was an escape from reality. Although he does not explicitly state it, it is clear from the allusions that he makes, and from the date of publication of the review, that Mao Dun is describing films featuring German Expressionist aesthetics. Although nowhere as nuanced as the extensive analysis that Siegfried Kracauer was conducting in research for *From Caligari to Hitler*, Mao Dun likewise perceives the rudiments of what Kracauer characterized as films made under the conditions of "the paralyzed collective soul," in which a film's "grand-style manner...helped to stupefy social consciousness."[277]

Pointing out ways that film's affective power could be put to the opposite effect, in order to overwhelm an audience by inundating their senses, Mao Dun refers to these films as "anesthetizing" to its audience.[278] In these European films of the early 1930s, he sees mass culture put to use to divert the public's attention away from the deepest problem plaguing their society, a void of spirituality that has left them empty of values—the very emptiness by which melodrama also attracts its audience. Moreover, Mao Dun writes that it is the excess of the films that has inoculated the audience from violence and spectacle. He describes this as an "education" in which technology is employed to leave the people "hesitant and dejected" ("迷惑彷徨, 颓唐悲观"). Nonetheless, he points out the ways in which a politics lies behind the sensory experience of escape:

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[277]Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 167.
[278] Mao Dun, "Shenguai Yeshou Yingpian," *Mao Dun Quanji* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1991), Vol. 19: 396.

The sad freedom of the many fascist thinkers in Europe is a sign of the spiritual bankruptcy of declining capitalism...We have seen the dominant classes dispirited...And this reveals their underlying ideology.[279]

Far removed from the growth of European authoritarianism, and at nearly the same time that Kracauer was writing his first articles from within the national context in which the films were being made, Mao Dun also saw that the study of these films could bring to light a troublesome relation between culture and politics. The article conveys a sharpening sense that the medium not only presented a new modern vernacular, but that it could exploit technological effects to generate deep emotion in order to engender a mass acceptance of frightening political realities. No longer seen as an imported product of foreign culture, either cosmopolitan or merely a medium of visual pleasures, but rather an active cultural site for local production and consumption, film was an intense site of debate about the future of Chinese society.[280] Mao Dun not only took up writing on film to understand mass culture within China, he reflexively considered it a rich source of material to read for the deep and unstable fault lines of Euro-American philosophy.

For Mao Dun, film is emblematic of the technological material that constitutes modernity, to be treated as both as a medium and knowledge in and of itself—a technical knowledge that connects the human to the materiality of labor, as well as a form of knowing coming from the physicality entertainment. Film thus affords a fuller understanding of the conditions that would bring society closer to a process of de-

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[279] Mao Dun, 396.

[280] See Miriam Hansen, "Fallen women, rising stars, new horizons." *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2000), 13; 17. Far from being a question of whether historical sketches like Hansen's retrospectively "[reproduce] the hegemony of the Western idiom at the level of theory and historiography," as she puts it, such close readings of films outside of the historical context of Chinese film criticism do not account for contemporary critical debates around which films were actively proceeding and producing radical new insights on the meaning and future of mass culture.

alienation of these aspects of life and closer to an experience of immediacy with reality. Moreover, this materialist knowledge intrinsically constitutes the basis for a politics more readily than any philosophy. All of Mao Dun's writings on film seem to start from the same question: isn't politics already part of the film experience that merged body, emotion, spirit and social life? The "tools" of media thus open up a vantage on history, to the human as collective thought within a social whole. Considered as a whole, a praxis entailed in the figure of the cookbook as a model of fostering critical collaboration, such technical knowledge continues the process of bringing together the ingredients of creative work and critical thought. Films, like machines, are extensions or prosthesis of the human, which, as Mao Dun reiterates throughout his work, deserve praise and to be put at in the lead of cultural movements. As such, these technologies circulate knowledge effortlessly, and in a ready-made modern vernacular of emotion. This is a form of communication without the internalized hierarchy fixed within literature and philosophy, and one that thereby constitutes a level plane of public consciousness.

His excitement over film's enlightening effects within a mass public anticipates the work on techné and technicity of late-twentieth-century philosophers like Bernard Stiegler. In identifying the ways in which technology (in general) has become integrated into contemporary forms of knowledge, Stiegler points out that these developments were in fact anticipated within the blind spots of modern European philosophy, leading all the way back to lapses already inherent in the premodern origins of the European worldview. Likewise, taking up "technique" as the way in which the film becomes part of the consciousness of the spectator, as well as a group of spectators collectively, Mao Dun signals a framework for understanding human activity that sees cinema within a field of

collective knowledge. Indeed, while he provisionally takes up useful aspects of Marxism, Mao Dun had deep reservations about the flawed nature of European philosophy going back at least to the major thinkers of the Enlightenment.[281]

As Stiegler describes the stakes of philosophy's conflict with technology, as well as the political consequences of overcoming this conflict, the outcome for social life is not the abstract reasoning sought by those idealizing a purity of reason, but very real and visible in terms of historical experience. He writes in terms of a polis that aligns with the masses envisioned as "becoming Chinese" through mass culture, but also in terms that are indeed also constitutive of a mass public in a society in the digital age:

> Opposition to the Sophists is constitutive of philosophy...[and] the opposition turns around the question of technics, such as it finds specification in writing...writing opens up the space particular to political 'publicity' and historical 'temporality'...tekhnē gives rise the polis[282]

Mao Dun's critical writings—the approach to cultural studies he established, alongside his own critique of European philosophical traditions—favored the technical sophistication of film, and also of writing as a form of technical practice, over a viewpoint that sought a theoretical coming to perfection of what was ostensibly foretold by idealist philosophy. Furthermore, throughout his critical writings Mao Dun focused on how the emphasis on art as praxis—particularly over a definition of "arts" that preserve either traditional hierarchies or even political common sense in the name of preserving the conventions of form—would give rise to a new politics.

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[281] See Mao Dun, "Yedu Ouji: Guanyu Shehui Zhuyi Xianshizhuyi ji Qita," Vol. 25: 172-179.

[282] Bernard Steigler, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), Vol. 1: 205.

By the early 1930s, Mao Dun's film reviews show that film was not at all "perceived, as part of western technological and cultural modernity," as Hansen has it, but was analyzed as a part of mass culture being employed to its own detriment (regardless of the pleasure that the individual formal elements gave) and which did not typically connect its rendering of reality back to life, but only gave rise to further contradiction. The project of reclaiming film for modernity was thus taken up by Chinese intellectuals putatively peripheral to both the centers of modernism and film production. Mao Dun clearly perceived the ways in which misappropriations of film technology had a hand in undermining and determining the modernity into which societies of the world had eagerly dived head first. This placed film in dire need of being reclaimed for political projects that delivered film's promise of mass art back to the people. This is especially visible in the fact that Mao Dun did not write off film's melodramatic or genre-driven aspects, elements that may not have fit a conventional view of fine art, but instead focused on these effects and emphasized their importance to the cultural form.

Figure 3.2 "Films of Gods, Spirits and Wild Beasts": Article by Mao Dun in *Shen Pao* Feb. 12, 1933.

Mao Dun's 1933 film review "Films of Gods, Spirits and Wild Beasts" retrospectively scrutinizes the ideological core of a series of highly popular fantasy films released from 1929 and 1930. The article appeared in the *ziyoutan* section of *Shen Pao* on February 12th, 1933 (Figure 3.2). These are films that would today likely fall within the genres of horror or science fiction, but that apparently did not yet fit into a generic category at the time that Mao Dun wrote the article—a fact reflected in the colorful title of the essay. In attempting to formulate the ominous political orientation that he sees expressed within these examples of popular culture, Mao Dun uses the phrase "The Second World War" long before the term came into common use in English or Chinese.[283] Within this group of films, he only specifically names *Metropolis*, likely because the film was the highest grossing and most widely publicized among these films in China during this time. Mao Dun says should be renamed with the Chinese title *A Science World*—an oblique comment that seems to indicate that he sees a naïve devotion to technological artifice in the film.[284] Discussing the fantastic worlds constructed in these films, Mao Dun highlights the contradictions arising from the fact that films with such ostensible themes of freedom, and set in a world of imagination, seem to reveal the opposite: he writes that the films are "'spiritually bankrupt'…like the many fascist intellectuals of Europe with their tragic freedom."[285]

Mao Dun writes that these kinds of films were feeding audiences' desire to see "the ideal world of the future," while behind these films was actually a larger motive of

[283] Mao Dun, "Shenguai Yeshou Yingpian," Vol 19: 396.
[284] Mao Dun, 395-396.
[285] Mao Dun, 396.

"preparing a mentality" to enter into war. A first glance at the review would lead one to believe that Mao Dun naively failed to see the complexity of Fritz Lang's film, especially in that the film's dark undertones convey a point of view on the future of human life in collective labor largely in line with his own ideas. However, what Mao Dun viewed was a version of Lang's film extensively edited by the studio that circulated globally—the full-length original print was so rare that it was considered lost until discovered in Argentina in 2005. The print of Metropolis that much of the world viewed during Mao Dun's time was not so much Lang's film as it was the product of the German studio system under the pressures of intensive capital. Mao Dun quite correctly perceives the film as a product emerging from within such an economic and ideological complex. Auguring that the film glimpses a Europe that was rapidly coming apart, Mao Dun eerily discerns the symptoms of historical change in an example of mass culture and uses his critique of the film to describe the philosophical origins of these changes.

Mao Dun's critique of the film brings to light a woefully inverted "ideal world" that began to appear on cinema screens in the early 1930s. His review thereby displays the rigor and foresight of the realist praxis with which he approached films and film technology. In this simple and succinct example of film commentary Mao Dun models for the *Shen Bao* audience the ways in which spectatorial engagement with popular cinema could lead towards widely divergent outcomes for film audiences in China and around the world. Viewed purely as entertainment, the fantasy of these films traps spectators in a total mystification that appears as an ideal reality under authoritarian political regimes emerging within advanced globalized capital. However, when audiences view film from within the broader set of the historically aware practices for engaging

with mass culture that Mao Dun exemplifies, spectatorship brings a form of collective consciousness: the shadows and monsters of films lead to an illuminating awareness of the process of history.

Chapter 4

Bullets, Bodies, and Beauty: Leftist Sound Cinema and the Militant Modernism of Xia Yan

"The Left-Wing Alliance, the Dramatists Alliance, the Publishers Alliance, the Arts Alliance, all [these] formed a vanguard service corps and donation groups, Tian Han also brought a number of theatre performers and music technicians; we ceaselessly worked to bring shows of gratitude to the injured fighters from the frontlines, using street theater, singing performances and other weapons of the arts, we beat the drums to raise the morale."

Xia Yan, "After the January 28th [1932] Incident," in *Lanxun Jiumeng Lu* (1984)

"It is the business of the sound film to reveal for us our acoustic environment, the acoustic landscape in which we live...from the roar of machinery to the gentle patter of autumn rain on a window-pane. The meaning of a floor-board creaking, a bullet whistling past our ear…"

Béla Balázs, "The Acoustic World" *Theory of the Film* (1945)

Like many stories of revolutionary intellectuals, this one begins in a bookstore. In 1927 and 1928, Xia Yan (born Shen Naixi, 1900-1995) frequented Kanzō Uchiyama's bookstore at 2048 Sichuan North Road in the Hongkou district of Shanghai. During these years, at the height of the leftist political movement in Japan, Kanzō's bookstore was not only one of the few places in Shanghai that one could acquire leftist books and magazines from Japan, but was also itself a publisher of these materials. Additionally, it was a place that Xia Yan could continue to practice speaking the Japanese language, which he had learned during seven years of studying for a degree in Kitakyushu. Kanzō learned of the young man's interests and of his translating projects and gave him recommendations.[286] In early 1928, Kanzō introduced the young man to Lu Xun who also frequented his store,

[286] See Xia Yan, "Lanxun Jiumeng Lu," *Xia Yan Quanji* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Wenyi Chubanshe, 2005), Vol 15: 36-71.

which was only about three blocks from the writer's former residence at 132 Shanyin Road. In 1932, Kanzō became the sole publisher of Lu Xun's books in mainland China. Kanzō was close friends as well with other writers and artists working in Shanghai at the time.

Raised in Hangzhou, Xia Yan had just returned to China in 1927 from nearly seven years in Japan where had studied engineering on an international scholarship. During an internship at the Yahata Steel Works in 1926, he had witnessed brutal working conditions faced by modern industrial workers and had begun to read socialist writers, including Fukumoto Kazuo. Xia Yan quickly used friendships with leftist intellectuals like Kanzō to form a broad network of acquaintances in the artistic and literary circles that dominated the intellectual life of late-1920s Shanghai. These groups included the Sun Association and the Creation Society. According to Zhou Bin, the groups were the origin of a leftist cultural front, shared an anti-imperialist orientation and were primarily inspired by Japanese communist Kazuo and thinkers of Soviet Russia. Some members of these groups, including Zheng Boqi and Qian Xingcun (A Ying), were also affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party and these would later work with Xia Yan on a CCP-ordained mission to plant communists in the Shanghai film industry.

Over the course of the next five years, members of the groups would collaborate to organize the League of Left-Wing Writers, a process in which Xia Yan played a key role. During its formation, the new organization maintained close ties with Lu Xun, who was not a member of the Communist Party but sympathized with the group's theoretical outlook and political goals and advised the young leftist artists and writers through correspondence. With his background in engineering, Xia Yan may have seemed an odd

fit within the artistic vanguard of the late 1920s, who had come of age writing plays and editing university literary journals; however, with his aptitude for technology he was well-suited for understanding the rapidly transforming mulch of urban popular culture that was forming in the overlap between print media, radio, and cinema. Moreover, as a pastime during his years abroad with the government exchange program, Xia Yan had studied modern European theater and translated plays staged by student groups in Kyushu.

The area in the Hongkou neighborhood where these leftist groups were active in 1927 also had a thriving theater scene that attracted great audiences of young people and students. This led Xia Yan and other members of the nascent left-wing cultural front to form a drama society (剧联) that staged social realist plays in the area beginning in 1929. In his memoir, Xia Yan describes early 1932 as a turning point in this theatrical work, specifically with the events surrounding of local debut of Joseph von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express*. He writes that intellectuals staged a protest at the Shanghai theater where the film, denouncing the ideology of imperialism contained in the film, which resulted in Hong Shen—a playwright who worked for Mingxing studio and the leader of the protest—being detained. Xia Yan writes that as intellectual circles devoted to theater banded together to denounce the film, the moment was "a victory for the struggle, this struggle brought the worlds of dramatists and filmmakers together to feel the power of organizing."[287]

As is also indicated in Lu Xun's essay criticizing *Shanghai Express*, the release of the film was a warning sign for artists and intellectuals who clearly saw that the mass

[287] Xia Yan, "Lanxun Jiumeng Lu," 88.

medium had a power to unite and inspire the public. As the biggest global box-office success of the year, the film confirmed to these writers that Hollywood would continually thwart efforts towards building a national political consciousness and the United States' global domination of the medium would continue to undercut the goals of the leftist cultural vanguard. Although he had strong convictions about the need for politically oriented arts organizations to enter the world of filmmaking, Xia Yan had no experience in filmmaking when he took up the CCP's call and became a screenwriter for Mingxing Studio in 1932. The Communist Party's plan to infiltrate the Chinese cinema industry was hatched after Xia Yan was contacted by Zhou Jianyun. Zhou was one of the founders of the Mingxing Film Studio and had years earlier formed close relationships with leftist writers that by the late 1920s worked in the same artistic circles as Xia Yan. Xia Yan passed along the information to the Communist Party Cultural Committee contact at the League of Left-Wing Writers and Qu Qiubai was put in charge of the operation. Xia Yan recounted that the group picked by Qu Qiubai also included playwright Tian Han and writer Ding Ling. By 1933, Xia Yan had already become an adroit screenwriter with several successful films to his name, including *Wild Torrents*. That year he was named the head of the "Film Group" [电联] of the Chinese Left-wing Cultural Alliance—a group organized by the Cultural Committee of the Chinese Communist Party—and began frequently publishing film criticism articles in the "Daily Film" column of *Chen Bao*.[288]

At the present moment in mainland China, Xia Yan is primarily regarded as a playwright, screenwriter and as communist China's first film critic. As a Deputy Minister of Culture under Mao Zedong, Xia Yan eventually became one of the party's main

[288] Xia Yan, "Lanxun jiumeng lu," *Xia Yan Quanji* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Wenyi Chubanshe, 2005), Vol 15: 119-124.

spokesmen on films throughout the 1950s. Xia Yan's earliest writing on film attended closely to filmmaking technique. His writings on film display the merging of an engineer's mind with an artist's eye that breaks down film technique into constituent parts by looking closely at elements of production, including editing and sound.

Xia Yan's early 1930s articles in *Chen Bao* review film in a pedagogical mode. He uses these articles (one titled "A Guide to Filmmaking Terms," for example) to teach the public the technical vocabulary used in film production processes. In particular, his writings focused on the problem of sound during the period of the development of film sound synchronization technology in China. Xia Yan hits upon the exactly same problem with filmic sound that Béla Balázs was wrestling in his writings on film in the German context at roughly the same time. Both felt that film sound abruptly brought spectators into a murky social and psychological terrain because, as Balázs put it, "there is a considerable difference between our visual and acoustic education." In developing a film sound forms with revolutionary elements, Xia Yan met with some resistance among entertainment professionals of the film industry in Shanghai. Nonetheless, the existing prints of the films that Xia Yan worked on at the Mingxing Studio exhibit evidence of his clear aim to exploit the sonic properties of film in pursuit of the radical political effects that he sought to create in locally-produced cinema.

Xia Yan's first serious foray into writing in Shanghai came with the publication of a translation of works by Karl Marx on the oppression of women within capitalist societies titled *Women and Socialism*. Understanding modern capitalism through attention to women's place in global economic markets is a motif that would run throughout Xia Yan's intellectual work. This focus distinguishes Xia Yan from other

leftist writers of mainland China like Mao Dun and Lu Xun, but also from many of the mainland Chinese filmmakers of the 1930s who were involved in the craze over portrayals of the "modern girl." The focus on women protagonists in the Chinese film industry resulted in a rise to prominence for stars like Hu Die, Li Lili, Ai Xia, and Ruan Lingyu, but also often brought tragedy upon these celebrity figures. During the early 1930s, Chinese studios produced a prolific number of films that centered on women in labor and leisure including films with strong social messages like *New Woman* (1935), *Love and Duty* (1931)*, Twin Sisters* (1933), *Daybreak* (1933), *Little Toys* (1933), *Goddess* (1934), and *Street Angel* (1937). Other films were less driven by social critique and more focused on depictions of the beauty and resolve of the modern woman: *The Peach Girl* (1931), *Three Modern Women* (1933), and *Queen of Sports* (1933).[289]

Seeking a symbol for Chinese modernity through representations of women was both a profitable commercial venture and a poignant political gesture. Images of modern women not only pervaded locally produced films, but were a mainstay of such print media in publications as *Linloon* and *Women's Life*. However, far from putting women to use for the cause of national defense as has been examined Rey Chow, who memorably declared that representations of women by modernist intellectuals in fiction turned women into "stand-ins for China's traumatized self-consciousness," Xia Yan's screenwriting constructs narratives around female (and male) protagonists involved in everyday struggles that do not rely on either sensationalist spectacle or sadomasochist

[289] Zhang Zhen perceptively writes that films with female protagonists played a lead role in the "the war between hard and soft films" because these film narratives presented "explanations of the sensory and political economy of the time embodied in the fate of the modern girl and her sexuality." *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 297.

appeals for justice.[290] Xia Yan develops narratives around women that draw out sources of social oppression from circumstances of the modern woman's life. That is to say, rather than evoking an allegorical representation of woman as nation, the struggles of female protagonists in Xia Yan's films constitute an entry point and window into the larger—often global—set of social displacements caused by new systems of imperialism under the guise of capitalist exchange.

Fittingly for a writer who began his career studying the ways in which the problems of political economy materialized in the modern family structure, Xia Yan's film productions take up women as figures on the frontlines of the daily processes of alienation and exploitation underlying systems of industrial labor and commodity exchange. As such, Xia Yan's work in film and literature glimpses a highly nuanced current of revolutionary leftism that influenced the development of a social imaginary within Chinese communism. This was a communist intellectual current that was sensitive to the racism of media forms offered by the hegemonic culture industries of the United States, and that sought equity and justice across class and gender from its inception, despite the fact that these principles were obscured by currents of factionalism and nationalism. Moreover, as someone who made radical interventions into the way that films were made, Xia Yan's work exemplifies a stratum of intellectuals whose technical accomplishments far outstripped their published, staged, or screened work. Although it was not Xia Yan's first screen credit, and not his most commercially or critically

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[290] Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 170.

successful film, *Cosmetics Market* captures the confluence of all of these diverse elements of Xia Yan's militant modernism.[291]

Occupied Time: Filmic Temporality and Historical Consciousness of Capital and Empire in Occupied Shanghai

Cosmetics Market is a microcosm of the world of lower-middle-class women's labor. The film takes place in city spaces dominated "petty urbanites," a group of roughly middle-class Shanghai residents described by Perry Link in examining popular serial fiction, but focuses in on a group of women who are living on the precarious brink of poverty.[292] The department store itself is a prime locus for imagining a middle class in the film, and also as an urban space in which women were both consumers and laborers.[293] In the film, the department store mise en scène provides a context for interrogating twentieth-century public spaces in which women's labor was bought and sold, but this labor was also tied into the very markets that were founded upon women's beauty as a commodity and as a consumer. As Anne Friedberg describes, the department store space marks the emergence of a kind of modern agency in which women were "endowed with purchase power" and turned into the "target of the consumer address." Friedberg writes that along with "museum- and exhibition-going, packaged tourism and... the cinema," "shopping" "relied

[291] Xia Yan was in fact credited as screenwriter under the pseudonym that he used in his production work at Mingxing, Ding Qianping (丁謙平).
[292] Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 5.
[293] Xia Yan's screenplay thus joins a long line of modernist works that feature department stores as conflicted sites for narratives exploring women's relationship to modernity, including Theodore Dreiser's 1900 novel *Sister Carrie* and the earlier "A Pair of Silk Stockings" (1897) by Kate Chopin.

on the visual register and helped to ensure the predominance of the gaze in capitalist society."[294]

The title of the film and the female shop attendants who are the protagonists of the film suggest the doubleness of this relationship between capitalism and the gaze. Just as images of female beauty sell female beauty products, as figures of both labor and consumerism, insofar as they gain modern agency within capitalist markets, women also become entangled in these markets—and the visual economies on which they are founded—as objects of exchange. The department store setting thus doubles as a representation of the gendered aspects of urban consumerism and of exploitative nature of intertwined cinematic economies like that of film stardom. In the crux of the film, when Hu Die resists being taken advantage of by the son of a store manager, Hu Die, the film's star and lead, resists becoming objectified as a film star on the grounds of her sex or gender.

Jan Whitaker has shown the ways in which the hyperbolic abundance of goods and services within department stores intensified consumer desire. She writes that by the 1920s, department stores had become an urban world in miniature: "larger stores were likely to offer alterations, banks, barber shops, beauty parlors, bridal consultants, caterers, charge accounts, checkrooms, child care, custom drapery and upholstery making, dressmaking, salons, fashion shows, fur cleaning and storage, gift wrapping, interior decorators, lessons in sports and hobbies...photography studios...theater ticket bureaus, travel bureaus."[295] Shanghai was not an exception to this, but was instead perhaps the city

[294] Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 37.
[295] Jan Whitaker, *Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 220.

in which the fervor for department stores reached its apogee. Wen-hsin Yeh details the major department stores that were founded in the first decades of the twentieth century, including Sincere, the Sun, Sun-Sun, and Wing On. The grandiose four-story Wing On proudly presented itself as a "'universal provider'...[of the] hundred goods [*baihuo*] from all around the globe [*huanqiu*]."[296] Indeed, the film depicts the first decades of department store shopping when it became indelibly established as a dominant feature of life in Shanghai and a tradition that has been renewed since the *gaige kaifang* period of the 1980s.

The film thus takes viewers of 1930s Shanghai who may have been familiar with these stores behind the counter and behind the scenes to witness the lives of these workers. For other viewers, who perhaps could not afford to shop at these high-end stores, the film offers a voyeuristic thrill of entering these stores, experiencing the fashions in clothing and music, and rubbing elbows with the well-heeled patrons. Nonetheless, as Yeh notes, an undercurrent of the exploitative nature of a global capitalism existed within this experience of consumerist modernity: while stores featured a predominance of Western goods, local goods were promoted through "an 'orientalized' conception...of Chinese goods from a Westernized perspective."[297] This theme is marked throughout the film, as customers and vendors reiterate the need to buy locally made Chinese goods as a nationalist strategy to counter the occupation of the city by foreign powers. In the film, this drive to embrace Chinese-made goods is a depiction of national

[296] Wen-hsin Yeh, *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843-1949*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 58.
[297] Yeh, 59.

resistance in the aftermath of Japan's devastating attacks on the city in the early months of 1932.

The film portrays the birth of a woman's revolutionary consciousness built around a tale of sexual harassment in the workplace. Although the film is set in a retail store, the premise is also a comment on the treatment of women as laborers within all capitalist markets, including film. It is thus a testament to the fact that filmmakers were highly conscious of the problems of exploitative sexist practices long before Hollywood's twenty-first-century scandals caused moral outrage in the United States. In the film, the department store is a means of support for a young woman whose older brother is murdered in a robbery on the streets of Shanghai in the opening scenes of the film. The man is the family's only financial support leading the man's sister and film's protagonist, Li Cuifen (played by Hu Die), to take a job in the wrapping department of the store. Lin, a supervisor at the store is captivated by Cuifen and has her transferred to the cosmetics department (Wang Xianzhai). She does well in the new position, but is unaware that the new job comes with the expectation that she sells beauty in ways that go beyond her work at the counter. Lin and his friend, Qian Youji (Sun Min), a son of a store manager, pursue the young clerk, eventually inviting her to a western-style New Year's Party followed by a private party in Youji's posh apartment. In the course of submitting to and then resisting the two men—and eventually facing further intimidation from Lin—Li Cuifen loses both her job and the opportunity to date a quiet and hardworking young man she had met at the store. Having sadly lost both her livelihood and her love, she becomes determined to find a new kind of independence and leaves the store with her head held high. The final scene depicts Li Cuifen operating her own small shop. However, the

addition of this scene was a source of disagreement between Xia Yan and Zhang Shichuan. Xia Yan wrote a strident editorial in *Chen Bao* arguing that the scene did not belong in the film because the scene depicting Li Cuifen's "economic independence" implied equality between men and women was a "type of indecently deceptive and self-gratifying dream."[298]

Fittingly for a film conceived by leftist agitators, the temporal setting is the first indication that we have that this is a milieu divided by the invasive forces of imperialist aggression. For the very same reasons the city felt cosmopolitan to those whose economic privilege allowed them to indulge in cultural exchange on an equal footing, daily life in occupied Shanghai was an experience of alienation and invasion to inhabitants who had to observe adopted holidays and work according to a schedule that was created around European and American seasonal sensibilities. Text is used diegetically to signal the extent to which this is a social world beholden to a confusion of calendars. The significance of these calendars coincides with what Walter Benjamin observed in calling calendars "monuments of...historical consciousness"—modes of temporality related to both the moments of revolution and to the suppression of social change. The world of labor in the film is organized around these calendrical markers of time. Rifts caused by class stratification and conflicts between shift labor and management are all dramatized through the calendar. The holidays in the film's plot call attention to the doubled exploitation of women because of gender and class. Likewise, calendars tie immorality to larger national and global political context. For example, the two scoundrels in the film, Supervisor Lee and Yao Xuefeng plot to pursue their romantic desires—which they call

[298] Xia Yan, "Guanyu *Zhifen Shichang* zhi Jiewei yuan Bianjuren Yousuo Shengming," *Xia Yan Quanji,* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Wenyi Chubanshe, 2005), Vol 6: 5.

"monopolizing" (独占) the person they are attracted to—while cutting to a calendar depicting multiple calendar systems in the background. The montage suggestively pictures the fusion of capitalism and foreign imperialism as the basis of the ethical outlook of the two, while also implicating the cultural policies of the Nationalist government (Figure 1).

Figure 4.1 Multiple temporalities, plotting scoundrels—Christmas Eve with the Guomindang emblem adjacent to the calendar. (Further invoking complicated temporalities, as is policy under the Guomindang government, the year is counted by the calendar with years numbered after the date of the 1912 Xinhai Revolution., the emblem's rays of the sun also symbolize progress through the twelve months of the Gregorian calendar and the references to the twelve-hour time frame of the premodern method of counting the hours of a day in China.).[299]

The scenes depicting the New Year's party are both critical to Li Cuifen's moment of liberation in the film's denouement and present an anxiety over conflicting paradigms of time in the occupied city. The scenes capture the ways in which two disparate systems of marking time underlying daily life of early 1930s urban Shanghai and show a society divided along economic and political lines tied to global systems of imperialism. Although the general plot deals with unequal pressures put upon women

[299] *Cosmetics Market* [*Zhifen Shichang*], directed by Zhang Shichuan (1933; Guangzhou: Guangzhou Qiaoiiaren Wenhua Broadcast Limited Distribution Company, 2005), VCD.

workers, the film follows a timeline arranged around the Western holiday celebrations of Christmas and New Year's Eve.

The New Year's Party is a central scene of conflict over local and imperial markings of time. Title cards with a stylized font, switch from "New Year's Party 1932" to "New Year's Party 1933" (see Figure 1). While these stylized title cards introduce the changing year in terms of the Gregorian calendar, the scene of the party that follows features a dramatized physical conflict between symbols drawn from the Chinese astrological system, based on a lunisolar notion of marking time. In this scene, a person dressed in a rooster costume and one in primate costume face off with each other. Moreover, the characters used are *wangnian* [忘年]. Although this formulation is comprehensible to many literate Chinese, the word is a Japanese term for a New Year's celebration party. The scenes thus function as a clear sign of a city already occupied by foreign powers and give a sense of foreboding over the possibility of a military—and potential cultural—invasion by the Japanese Empire.

Finally, before she decides to attend the party Li Cuifen receives a letter from the management. When it appears onscreen, it further establishes the confusion between the two time systems, and ties it to the exploitation of labor through an extension of the working day in the department store (Figure 4.2). The market for labor is subject to a split temporality that is shown in one scene in which Li Cuifen moved up to the cosmetics counter to help with the holiday rush and in another in which she receives an announcement that her hours are extended because of the next day's New Year's holiday vacation. Shots that feature text resonate with historical traces of imperialist cultural hegemony that reach into the daily lives of Shanghai residents. Although not crucial to

comprehension of the film's narrative, these moments serve, as Michel Chion puts it in *Words on Screen*, as "ripples of signification."[300] In the paper announcement of a change in hours from the management that Li Cuifen receives, the New Year's holiday is conflated with Chinese New Year. Only four years earlier, in 1928, the Guomindang government had begun to take vigorous—and unpopular— measures to eradicate the lunar calendar. Henrietta Harrison has found that throughout the ensuing years the public resisted the newly imposed calendars. The disparity in the calendar systems is explicit in the film with the note using the word *yuandan* (元旦) to signify the Western New Year and Chinese New Year (typically called 农历的元旦), falling on February 2nd in 1932 (Figure 4.2). Not only this, but the note shows that vacation time that was given for a western holiday instead of the extremely important, locally celebrated holiday period later in the year, which, Harrison notes, was a particularly contentious issue stemming from the use of the new calendar system in the 1930s.[301] The use of objects with text make the political effects of changes of calendar materially present in the film and tap into feelings of dislocation and resentment in audience members.

[300] Michel Chion, *Words on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 80.
[301] Henrietta Harrison. *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China, 1911-1929*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 199-200.

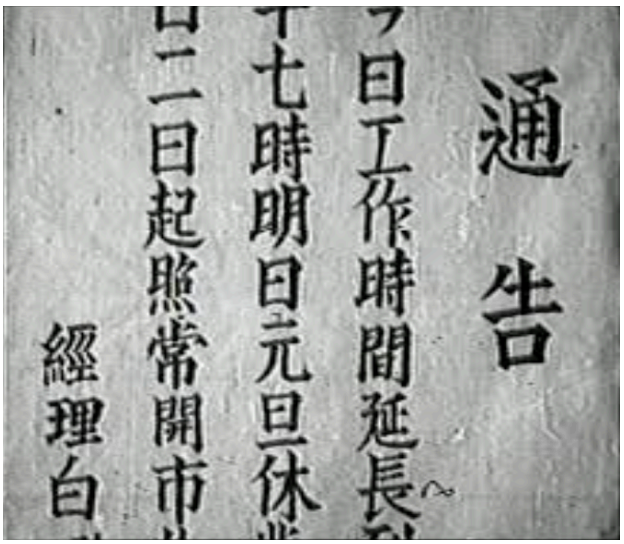

Figure 4.2 New Year's Hours Notice to Department Store Workers

At the New Year's party, the two costumed astrological figures enact a fight at the center of the dance floor with a jazz orchestra playing in the background of the upscale club. The rooster wins and gives three loud calls in triumph before the revelers take the stage in dancing. The rooster calls up an additional reference within film and sound recording industries—the Pathé rooster. Partnerships with Pathé were part of a larger vertical integration of Zhang Shichuan's Mingxing Studio that began in 1926.[302] The rooster emits its raucous call in victory through which Zhang Shichuan enacts his own aspirations to success in 1933 (see the final frame in Figure 4.3). Nonetheless, as Huang Xuelei remarks, Zhang Shichuan had a dismal year in 1931 and 1932, with the company on the verge of bankruptcy entering 1933. The scene is thus an invocation—a prayer—for a prosperous new year. Attesting to its importance to the studio, the scene is also featured prominently on promotional materials associated with the film, including a magazine

[302] See Huang Xuelei, *Shanghai Filmmaking: Crossing Borders, Connecting to the Globe, 1922*-1938, esp. 38-61

called *Mingxing* the studio made for the film's release, which showed the scene along with Hu Die's seated image and an image of a state-of-the-art film camera, on a promotional book (See Figure 7, on page 237).

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Figure 4.3 New Year's Party at the Dancehall—The Monkey and the Rooster Face Off

The rooster in the final shots of the fight sequence calls to mind a source of foreign capital—the studio's association with Pathé. The scene, with its outlandish costumes, seems to be an ostentatious spectacle staged by the director and co-owner of Mingxing to convince the audience that Zhang Shichuan was intimately tied to international capital. The sequence reflects back on the previous year, during which Zhang Shichuan had released two partially-synchronized sound pictures—and dramatizes the studios move into new territory of sound integration with the release of *Cosmetics Market* in 1933. The scene thus hopefully presents a typographical flourish that highlights what Zhang Shichuan felt would be a momentous year: changeover from a

year in which Chinese audiences would finally make the shift into fully synchronized sound in viewing local films.[303]

Zhang Shichuan's excitement notwithstanding, Xia Yan faced the embrace of fully synchronized sound films with suspicion. Would film producers create films that conveyed the deeper meanings of the acoustic world to the audience? Conversely, were audiences ready to comprehend the meaning of "a bullet whistling past the ear"? In his writings as a critic, Xia Yan's encounters with Hollywood film had already been full of statements of suspicion over the ways in which the absorption of sound into film had created a level of filmic engagement beyond the comprehension of audiences and critics. The soundtrack of *Cosmetics Market* shows Xia Yan contending with the problem of synchronized film sound. Sound is a central part of the film's structure and style in a way that both acts as a lynchpin for the plot, but also supplements and exceeds the plot in offering the audience bodily effects that capture the sensations of urban modernity and that reproduce the global displacements caused by capitalism and imperialism. Xia Yan worked with Situ Huimin as the film's sound technician. The two had been collaborators in communist revolutionary arts circles since 1929. The result is a film that experiments with sound in diegetic, extradiegetic and nondiegetic forms, to elaborate the points of conflict in the filmic narrative. Finally, these sound effects add a layer of indexical reality to the film experience in a way that pierces the world of fetish and fantasy that the department store setting invites.

[303] A 1932 article in *Eastern Daily Pictorial Supplement* (*Dongfang Ribao Huakan*) announcing the production of *Cosmetics Market* described Hong Shen traveling to the United States to acquire synchronized sound recording technology. *Dongfang Ribao Huakan* No. 1 1932.

The sound effects of *Cosmetics Market* create an audiovisual archive that holds material traces of the spectral economies of global capital that were part of the immediate experience of the early-twentieth-century Chinese city. The sounds of the film intensify the tension between the exuberance of conservative entrepreneur Zhang Shichuan and the leftists' warnings of the consequences of aligning Chinese film with global media industries whose profits relied on integrating sound and image. Within these details, the film offers its strongest critique of imperialism to audience members that listened closely.

Despite the heady optimism of the film's scenes of department store commerce, the film was made in a Shanghai that was not only divided into concessions administrated by occupying foreign nations, but also within a country entering into a national crisis. The Japanese army head invaded portions of northwestern China and had viciously bombed Shanghai on January 28th, 1932. Although the messages are restrained, the film shows leftist writers were moving towards creating a local form of sound film that could activate the desires of a mainland Chinese audience to resist imperialism. Not only did this mean a resistance to Japanese military forces, but the film shows that leftists were ultimately aiming at the creation of a political movement that could interrupt a globally consolidated collaboration of imperialist states. Xia Yan's writings show that leftists feared that the Japanese Empire would continue the cultural and military aggressions in China that Western powers had engaged in since the mid-nineteenth century, as well ultimately even forge broader patterns of global colonialist exploitation to rival U.S. and European hegemons. Even before Japan's full military invasion of China, leftist writers took these signs as portents of the growing need for a proletarian revolution. In *Cosmetics*

Market, Xia Yan explored sound cinema as a medium that could reach the consciousness of the public and be an important front in mobilizing the public to action against foreign invasion and occupation. The result is an example of experimentation with film sound that confronts Hollywood's hegemony head on. At the level of sound, the film searches for ways to cultivate the listening practices of Chinese audiences—to turn their attention to the colonizing power of capital that was hidden in sound.

Shots Ring Out: Spectacles of Crime, Failures of Vision and the Sonic Attraction

In a review of Mervyn LeRoy's *The Gold Diggers of 1933* for *Chen Bao*, Xia Yan wrote that the film was "too much of a sound film" ["太'有声电影'"]. Xia Yan's main objection arises from an approach to filmmaking in which "the sense of listening comes to replace the sense of seeing" ["听觉来代替视觉"].[304] This critique exemplifies the feelings Xia Yan expressed toward film sound his film reviews. Xia Yan's writings share close affinities with the critique of film sound in the work of Béla Balázs, who wrote that sound film should not merely replace visual representation, and thus remain a "copying device" but the introduction of sound into film could "[reveal] something hitherto hidden from our eyes—or ears."[305] These two early film critics were examples of a current of early 1930s leftist film analysis that pushed towards the radically different experience of cinema resulting from closer attention to the ideological effects of sound. In China, Xia Yan would find an intellectual and creative collaboration on the basis of this idea in his work with Nie Er and Tian Han—the work of the three culminated in "March of the

[304] Xia Yan, "*Gewu Shengping* Wo Ping," Vol. 6: 46-47.
[305] Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, trans. Edith Bone (New York: Dover, 1970), 197.

Volunteers," a film song that would become the anthem of the PRC. Indicating the dense and interconnected media ecology of the period, the first discs of the song that were released with the 1934 film *Children of Troubled Times* also featured the Pathé rooster on the label and were distributed by one of Pathé's Shanghai subsidiaries.

Cosmetics Market had very little of the rousing nationalism of that film and instead glimpses the subtleties of the encounter of increasingly sophisticated Chinese filmmaking practices with the forces of global capitalist markets. In both Shanghai and Hollywood, the proliferation of stories and images depicting the lives of urban women in sound films, as well as in media surrounding sound film, also indicates that the status of women's bodies in modernity—as laborers and as entertainers—was intimately related to the question of sound media. Cultural critiques of film sound offered by Balázs and Xia Yan identified sound film not only as an attraction, but as a feature of film that could intensify authoritarian forms of social control. With the commodification of sound recording technologies in the late 1920s and early 1930s, a powerful set of new media forms tantalized capitalists and also appealed to revolutionaries seeking to counter capitalism's exploitative uses of human body. The first steps of Xia Yan's interest in the political power of sound are hidden within the soundtrack of *Cosmetics Market*. The film thus stands as a vestige of the initial stages of a leftist mode of filmmaking that enhanced and expanded the audience's engagement with a film through new sensory and cognitive horizons opened up by sound.

An early discussion of Mingxing's sound films appeared in the Shanghai tabloid *Eastern Daily Pictorial Supplement*. The article features a positive response to *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony*, a film that was directed by Zhang Shichuan with star Hu Die receiving

top-billing. The film is often described as China's first film with fully synchronized sound, although as Huang Xuelei explains, the film used sound-on-disc technology provided by Pathé.[306] The story of the fortitude of a well-known sing-song girl caught in a web of exploitation, the film offered audiences entertainment that contained a timely moral message that countered the images of indecency and exoticism perpetuated by orientalist stage musicals (perhaps most famously by American composer Leroy Shields). The film also exhibited the interest women involved in forms of labor endemic to the modern city, a theme further developed in *Cosmetics Market*.

The article in *Eastern Daily Pictorial Supplement* provides a revealing look at a historical context in which sound and bodies were in constant collision in the media environment. The review is surrounded by nude and semi-nude women's bodies. Moreover, several of the images have musical measures overlaid on the images (Figure 4.4). Published on May 28th 1933, the article on Mingxing's sound films mentions the film as well as the Zhang Shichuan films that followed in 1931, *Old Times in the Capital* (旧时京华) and *Movie Star's Luck* (银星幸运). Published two weeks after the premiere of *Cosmetics Market* at the Strand in Shanghai, the article says that Tianyi and Lianhua have also attempted synchronized sound but describes Mingxing's films as "like a breath of fresh air" or, literally as "like new to the eyes and ears" ("似觉耳目一新"). The article announces that Hong Shen had gone to the United States to purchase sound equipment and enthusiastically exhorts audiences to see Mingxing's films in order to support the movement to buy national goods. The article tells audiences that they "cannot idly watch and wait" and that they must "vent [their] anger!"—this most likely in response to the

[306] Huang Xuelei, *Shanghai Filmmaking: Crossing Borders, Connecting to the Globe, 1922-1938*, 50.

recent Shanghai Incident of January 1928 and the ensuing Japanese military occupation of Shanghai.

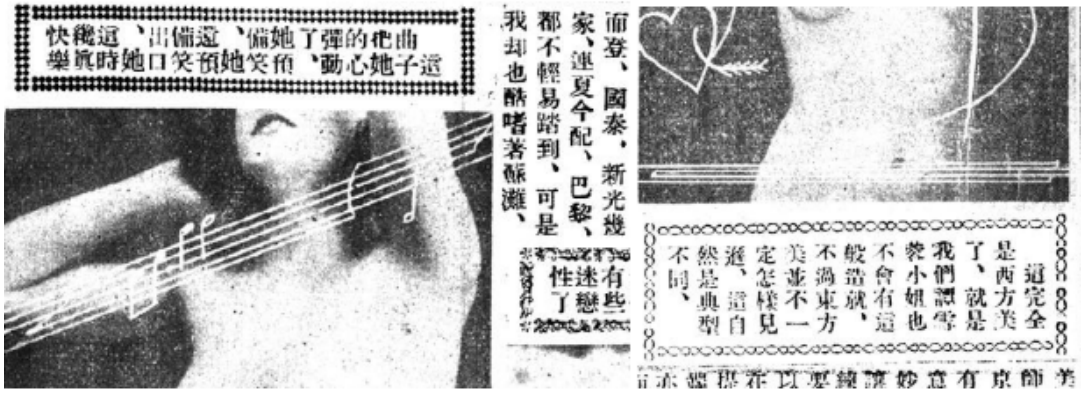

Figure 4.4 Collages of bodies and sound frame the review of Mingxing's sound films in *Eastern Daily Pictorial Supplement* (Shanghai), May 28, 1933.

The images in *Eastern Daily Pictorial Supplement* glimpse a moment in which the public was struggling to grasp the ways in which sound in film and recorded music was moving and harmonizing bodies. Reflecting a zeitgeist in which the explosion of radio and phonograph technologies had created a new sonic environment, the images visualize the magic of recorded sound as a commodity separated from its source, which floated through cities across the world. The image on the right (above the article about Mingxing) gives a comparison between women's physical beauty in the west and women in China. The text above the image on the left reads: "This song plucked her heart, she gets ready to laugh, she gets ready to laugh out loud, this time it is really a chance for happiness." In a context in which women's physical beauty and sound had both become commodified—commodities often integrated into scenes of dance numbers in Hollywood musicals like those of the *Gold Diggers* series the tabloid shows the audience curious over the effects of sound on and within the body.

Narratively and aesthetically, *Cosmetics Market* directly markets women's beauty. The film expresses the experience of Chinese city-dwellers facing schizophrenic divisions between global and local at the level of bodily sensation. The film uses sound to create a felt sense of the imperialist influence of empire—especially that being established by the reach of American capitalism within media industries. The film thereby presents the invasive cultural imperatives carried out through the invisible hand of capitalism. The film's experiments with sound not only cultivate audience's cinematic listening practices, but also show that leftists suspected that while the forces of this imperialism may be invisible within a film, they might still be audible.

The opening scenes of *Cosmetics Market*, dramatizes the formation of a crowd drawn to a spectacle. An unstable connection between the visual and the sonic thus initiates the film. Xia Yan's screenplay begins with a description of the physical setting "on the street of a big city" in "a silent winter night" and then describes a policeman on patrol, rickshaws and passerby. The script then presents an onomatopoeic rendering of gunshots that break the silence of the scene: "砰! 砰" [*Peng! Peng!*] and explains that these two shots. In the film, the visual field obsessively captures the crowd from multiple angles, with the result that the camera is just as interested in the crowd as it is with the crime and victim. The crowd runs towards the gunshots seeking to identify the crime through finding the origin of the sound (Figure 4.5).[307]

[307] Xia Yan, "Zhifen Shichang," *Xia Yan Quanji* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Wenyi Chubanshe, 2005), Vol 4: 78.

Figure 4.5 Shots ring out and a crowd gathers

After several shots of the gathering crowd running toward the scene of the crime, the camera quickly pans to the running mob. The scenes reproduce and reiterate the limited ocularcentrism of the crowd, establishing a self-referential relationship between the spectators and the urban masses within the film. In a theme that will continue throughout the film, vision confuses, while the ears lead the audience to search for reason and causality. The panning camera also blurs and distorts giving the feeling that the film viewer becomes lost in the crowd.

The ethical and emotional pull of the scene is heightened through dialogue that reasserts the unjust nature of the crime, as well as its connection to a system of capital in which the loyalty and dedication of the laborer finds an end in meaningless crime. As the crowd asks why the man didn't just give the thief the money the man says, in agony, "The money wasn't mine. Oh...if it was mine, I just would have let him take it right away. I am carrying this account...for the company." The man's loyalty impugns the company while demonstrating both the moral integrity of the worker and his entanglement within a system that has caused his death—the sequence highlights an urban social world in which worker's labor is devalued while companies ultimately profit.

The camera briefly flashes a medium close up of the dying man's face in agony, but the shot cuts again to a medium shot positioned behind the crowd, the mob even

crowds out—frustratingly—the audience's view of the victim. The viewer is situated as a member of the crowd that shows up late and must try to negotiate an occluded view (Figure 4.6). The audience identifies with a man running to the rear of the group as he tries to push his way through. The obstruction of vision thus amplifies our desire to see the spectacle unfold more directly. Still, this is withheld and the audience finally see two shots of members of the crowd and, as two more police officers break through the crowd, the viewer must read the severity of the man's injury through shots of the faces of the bystanders. Nonetheless, while the image is obscured, the audience clearly hears the dialogue tracks of the police officers.

Figure 4.6 Witnesses on the street crowd in to see the victim of the gunshot

Above all, the sound of the gunshot is a formal and technological attraction that is the catalyst for both the narrative and the production of the film itself. The audience is drawn to the film as a sound film in order to experience Mingxing's sound technology. Just like the gathering crowd, filmgoers have come to see a crime. The gunshots initiate a sense of loss and injustice in the narrative and spectators come to the film with the desire and hope for resolution. Sound thus lays a foundation of affective intensity that will ground the drama of the film.

The gunshots not only launch the plot—being the premise of the father and provider's death from which the entire story follows— they also become the signature attraction in the studio's promotion of the film. The promotional magazine for the film contained a novelized version of the film story, rewritten for the Mingxing studio publicity magazine by Wang Qianbai, who was the screenwriter for the Lianhua animated film *Princess Iron Fan* (1941). The adaptation of the film reveals the gunshots as the main attraction of the story, rather than opening with the establishing shot, the story begins with the sound of two two gunshots (see image on the right, Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7 The cover of *Mingxing*, a promotional magazine for the Mingxing Studio, featuring Hu Die and a glimpse at the sound stage during the shooting of a New Year's Party Scene (left); The issue also included an adapted screenplay —a *Cosmetics Market* "film story"—by Wang Qianbai (right). The images in the background of the picture of Hu Die pair the attraction of the film's star with that of the film's advanced audiovisual technology of the camera used by the studio (a Mitchell camera with a sound recording attachment). *Mingxing* 1, May 1, 1933.

As a sound that can potentially signify war, crime, self-defense or revolt—and which often leaves the listener helpless to distinguish which one of these is underway—the gunshot has a distinctly modern way of presenting the disconnect between senses and reality. Xia Yan homes in on the gunshot as the most semantically dense sound. The sound opens the film and thus suggests the tight concentration of meaning that is contained in all film sound. As a sound effect that immediately becomes an element of plot, the gunshot precedes all of the film's visual logic based in continuity editing. The opening to *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* provides a well-known example of the plot unfolding around a gunshot. The film, released the same year as *Cosmetics Market*, plays with the anxiety surrounding the connection between sight and sound in film. The

saturation of the sounds of the printing press is broken by the suspense generated by the camera's focus on a gun in the hand of Hofmeister. In that film, the plot begins when the gunshot is withheld. The viewer is left to wait, in sustained suspense, until Lohmann picks up the phone, the lights go out and the viewer is forced to only experience the film blindly on purely an auditory level.[308]

In 1937, writing a radio play for broadcasts done under the All-Shanghai Federation for the Support of Armed Resistance, Xia Yan more fully explored the creation of dramatic effects through sound. Xia Yan's radioplay, *The 28th, That Day* (['七·二八'的那一天]), published in the magazine *New Knowledge*, sets a community's awakening to historical events to a rhythmic punctuation of firecrackers, gunfire and explosions. The prominent placement of Xia Yan's radioplay in the publication was rapidly becoming recognized as a leading figure in the vanguard of a kind of militant modernism in wartime Shanghai (Figure 4.8). The play is a depiction of a day in a small shop in China during the events of Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which marked the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War and Japan's full-scale invasion of China. The public's reactions to receiving news about the first events of the war is conveyed through dialogue between a neighborhood shopkeeper and his customers.

[308] In using sound to create an absence in which the view searches for the cause of the shot, both films are initiated through play with what Michel Chion describes as a sound film's "synch points" and writes that "This punctual, abrupt coincidence of a sound and visible impact thus becomes the most direct and immediate representation of the audiovisual synch point…Lacan's *point de caption*…the moment around which the narrations time is constructed." See Michel Chion, *Audio-vision*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 60.

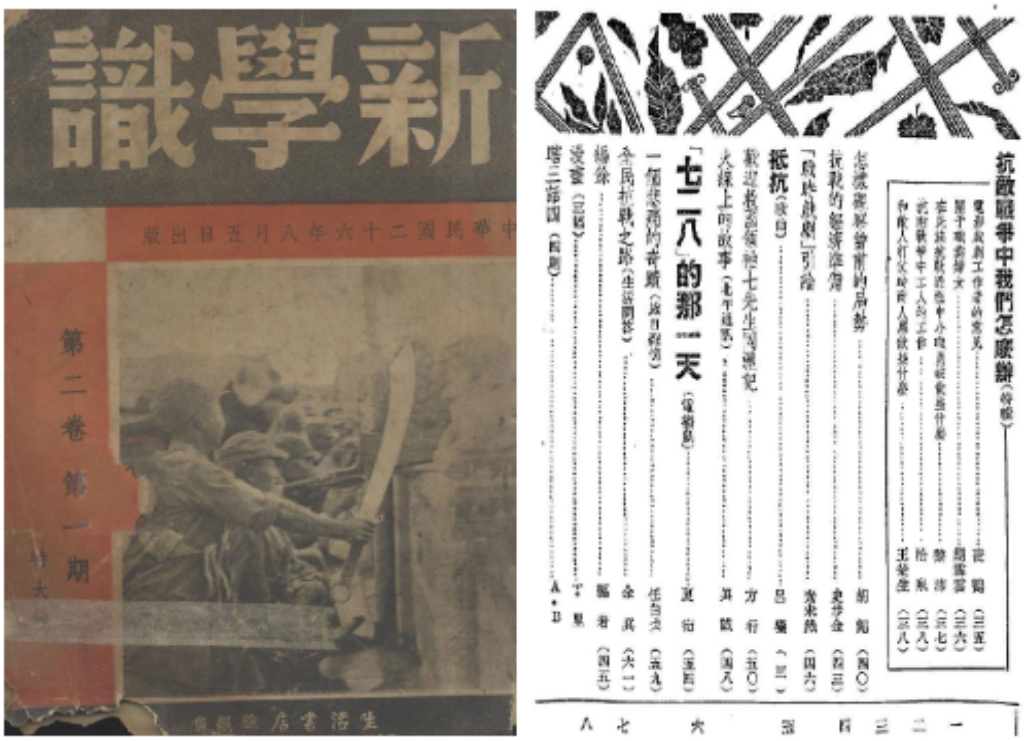

Figure 4.8 The cover and table of contents of *New Knowledge*, showing Xia Yan's radioplay, *The 28th, That Day* ['七·二八'的那一天]. *New Knowledge* 2, vol. 1, Aug. 5, 1937.

While Xia Yan's interest in sound will eventually lead to these more direct engagements with media form, *Cosmetics Market* is Xia Yan's first encounter with the deployment of sound by global entertainment films. The film thus reveals a historical conjuncture and media ecology in which audiovisual culture was dominated by Hollywood—and within which leftists in China were trying to carve out a national art form. At the level of its soundtrack, the film reveals outlines of the political economy of film sound after the invention of effective sound-on-film technologies in late 1927, developments that were soon followed by a boom in fully synchronized sound films in Hollywood in the consolidation of radio and film industries in the years following the

economic crisis of 1929. However, in combination with an attention to sounds and their causes, the film obsessively circles around questions of obscured vision.

Cinematographer Dong Keyi displays a virtuosity in constructing a cinematic visual field in the film that places him among the top filmmakers of his day. The utilization of cutting-edge camera techniques—panning, tracking shots, creative framing of characters—along with stylized elements of mise en scène that create some of the most iconic cinematic images of the film's star, Hu Die. On this level, much of the film is focused on the construction of the star image of Hu Die, who had played the lead in Zhang Shichuan's films since his first success with the *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* series. Nonetheless, although the film presents sound as rich and meaningful, vision is constantly hindered and confused. The film thus constantly returns the audience to the feeling that in order to come to terms with what it means to watch a work of audiovisual media, the problems of experiencing reality through the sense of sight must always be left on the table. The film alternates between images of the face of its star and shots that are obstructed or obscured. As if reiterating the motif of the crowd blocking the scene of the crime in the first sequence, such scenes create misgivings over limitations of sight in the cinematic experience.

After the family of the murdered elder Li brother arrives at the hospital, three shots introduce the three central female characters through a chain of close-ups of the three women overwhelmed with outrage, confusion and grief with a sudden and unsettling intimacy. The close-ups achieve an effect of claustrophobia with the spectator, whose eyes had just been drawn to the scene of the crime with a morbid curiosity, reproached for wanting to get such a close look at another's suffering (Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.9 The faces of grief: the victim's family**.**

Shots of Hu Die framed by windows, shot from an outside space in which the audience imagines they are looking in, call attention to our gaze, to the voyeurism of cinematic viewing of female stars. Moreover, in each of these shots Hu Die is looking out as a privileged viewer. In the first, she gazing out at the shadows of two lovers in a neighboring apartment behind a closed window curtain. In the second, she looks out of a transparent door with a lattice pattern that fuses modernist and classical Chinese design elements at the rickshaw drivers and pedestrians trudging their way through quickly falling snow. The latter scene echoes a recurring geometric motif present in elements of the mise en scène throughout the film, an aesthetic indulgence that identifies the spaces of the department store and the apartments of the affluent.

Figure 4.10 Looking at Hu Die and Hu Die as a spectator with obstructed vision

The visual aesthetics of the film thus furnish a basic syntax through which viewers are invited to look at Hu Die, but within which cinematic vision is a constant source of anxiety. In scenes like this, the audience looks at Hu Die as a spectator—looking with curiosity at a neighbor behind closed curtains or through a lattice at rickshaws on the street (Figure 4.10). Close-ups present this conflicted nature throughout the film—creating an effect in which the scopophilic pleasure of consuming the characters alternates with a kind of viewer's remorse. Much like shopper's remorse, these scenes remind the audience that they are consumers of film, indulging in an act of consumption not so different from the bourgeoisie customers who frequent the department store.

The most vivid sequence of this type occurs in the second half of the film, in a scene in which store office worker, Lin Jiandu, and the aptly named wealthy playboy Zhang Youji (张有济, literally "Has Finance Zhang") try to take advantage of the seemingly naive Hu Die. In this scene, vision is very clearly the domain of those in power as they exchange of glances to ensnare the unwitting Hu Die, the exchange of her beauty becoming an extension of the card game—an asset that changes hands through a series of looks.

Figure 4.11 Obscured vision and men at play

The montage conveys that despite apparent initial eye trouble—or pantomiming the notion that one can't believe one's eyes—Zhang Youji recognizes Hu Die's beauty, formulates a plan and then communicates this plan with the conniving supervisor. As this all takes place with a look, not only is vision not to be trusted, vision is used to betray trust (Figure 4.11). In these subtle ways, the film contains a self-reflexive critique of film as a visual medium that can blend of fantasy and reality for an unsuspecting audience. Of course, as the playing cards signify, accepting the visual contract that the filmed images are reality is the game of cinema. Moreover, this also the market for beauty. The global

economic exchange shared by both films and make-up based on a visual field that is obsessed with cosmetics and that sells the appearances to a neurotic and self-conscious public.

The audiovisual contract, however, is much more slippery. This is the sensory field that Xia Yan leads the audience through from the film's first scenes. Sound allows for subtleties that are abstract, theoretical, and profound and that can feel even more immediate than a close up. *Cosmetics Market* is only the third synchronized sound film made by the studio. With the "audiovisual contract" between audience still unsettled, the film shows Xia Yan and his collaborators looking for a way out of the game that Hollywood had established. The film's most unexpectedly subversive moments come with experiments with sound that create the kind of cinematic fidelity that directly connects the audience to the ethics and politics of the film.

The Radio Picture and A Market for Beauty: Disrupting Hollywood's Dreams of Audiovisual Monopoly

In 1933, Xia Yan was working at a furious pace as a screenwriter in the Shanghai film industry. Films based on his scripts, *Twenty-Four Hours in Shanghai* and *Wild Torrents*, were released this year and he garnered critical praise and success with local audiences for these films with overtly leftist messages. Mao Dun, for example, lauded the rigorous form of cinematic realism of the latter film and commented that the film succeeded in conveying complex social realities of the urban/rural divide in mainland China. *Cosmetics Market* was eventually less successful and Xia Yan himself criticized the final scene that was added to the film, which brought the female protagonist back within the ambit of capitalism. *Cosmetics Market* dramatizes labor and world markets through the

problem of the modern woman, but does not permit what Rey Chow describes "a new kind of voyeurism...as the other side of solemn patriotism."[309] In this way, the film presents a profound contradiction that likely reflects the antipodal political attitudes of Zhang Shichuan and Xia Yan: Hu Die was one of China's most successful female stars at the time and, as the star of the film, was billed as the main attraction upon which Mingxing Studio marketed the film, but as the title suggests the story is a direct critique of globalized industries around commodification of women's labor and female beauty.

While attempting a radical social critique, *Cosmetics Market* is ultimately most interesting for the failures and contradictions that compromised the film project, especially the tensions synchronized sound film presented within industries of media and mass culture outside of Europe and the United States in the early 1930s. Within the film, sonic and visual elements coexist uneasily and the conflicts between these two levels of the audience's involvement are a window onto the ongoing debates over the future of the film medium in modern China. The film speaks to the susceptibility of motion picture aesthetics for exploitative ends, as well as to the potential of film as a mass medium capable of uniting and politicizing an audience.

Cosmetics Market comes on the heels of Zhang Shichaun's of production the partially synchronized sound film, *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony*. Xia Yan's involvement in the project occurs during a period in which he had expressed intense interest in the ideological effects of film sound on film audiences. The magazine *Arts* (艺术) was published in 1930 under the direction of the CCP with Xia Yan as the head editor. The cover of the magazine depicted a scene from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (see Figure 4.12,

[309] Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, 86.

image on the left)— the magazine thus presented the coordinates of a cultural vanguard that spanned literature, drama and film, but that was specifically geared towards film. In *The Chronicle of Chinese Film*, Chen Bo documents the fact that the magazine was issued less than a month after the inaugural meeting of the League of Left-Wing Writers that Lu Xun led at the behest of the Chinese Communist Party leadership and that during this meeting a leadership council was named that consisted of Lu Xun, Xia Yan and A Ying. Chen notes that the magazine was "the initial expression of interest in cinema on the part of left-wing literary workers."[310]

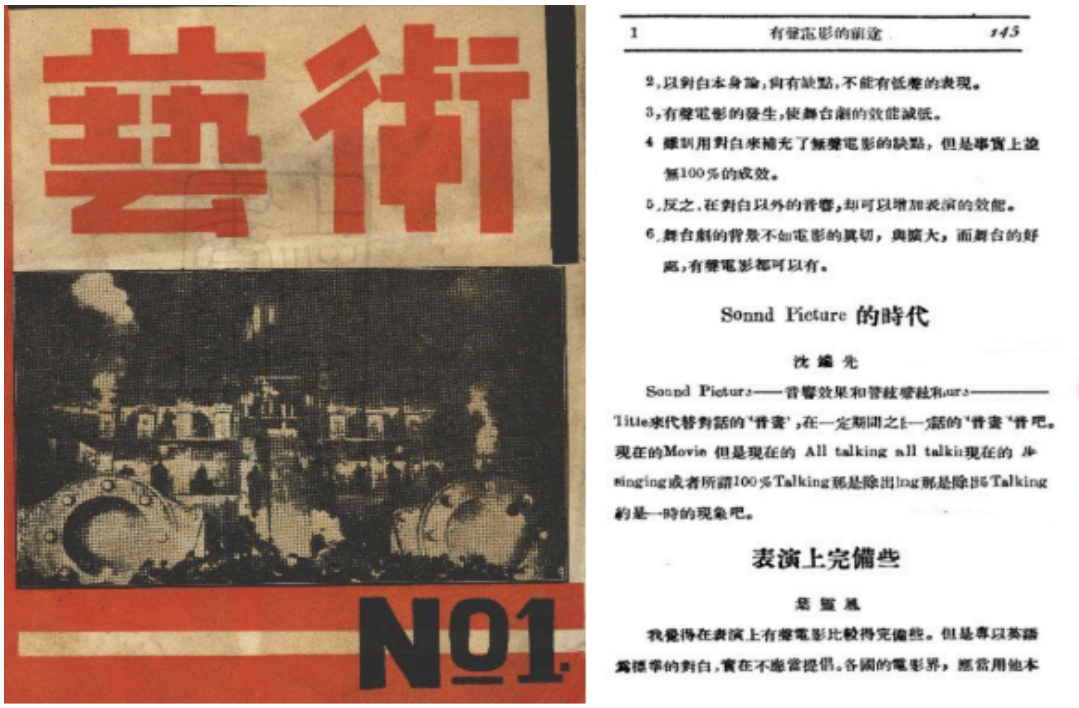

Figure 4.12 *Arts* [*Wenyi*] magazine. The cover, featuring Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, on the left; Xia Yan's essay contribution is pictured on the right, titled "The Era of Sound Picture." *Wenyi* 1, Mar. 16, 1930

[310] Bo Chen, *Zhongguo Dianying Biannian Jishi* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian chubanshe, 2005), 85-86.

The magazine's primary engagement with cinema focuses on film sound. An eighteen-page section of the magazine was titled "*Quo vadis*? Talkie" in Latin and English, with the title "The Future of Sound Film" in Chinese below this title. The section featured articles by Zheng Boqi, who wrote a materialist analysis of modern art called "Movie-Radio-Talkie" and director Shen Xiling, who wrote a piece demanding the local production of "talkies." Writing as editor, Xia Yan opens the collection of articles with a piece titled "The Future of Sound Film" ("有声电影的前途"). This introduction describes the fact that in 1929 in the United States "the *Talkie* surpassed the *Movie.*" Xia Yan briefly gestures towards an interpretation of industrial film production in terms of political economy by stating in the opening of the article that a categorical shift has taken place: "From the standpoint of production, starting with sound films, smaller capitalist interests will be merged into big capital." He then relates that all sound film technology is actually held in a monopoly interest by R.K.O. He explains that this section of the magazine will consist of "predictions" that intellectuals have on the future of sound film. Xia Yan asks: "Will the *all singing, all dancing and all talking films* that will be the ones that are forever welcomed by audiences? If not, what is the form that will replace this current state of affairs?"[311]

Extending his earlier comments, which implied that the plethora of seemingly new pictures had really just emerged out of R.K.O.'s new dominance of sound synchronization technology, Xia Yan's "The Era of Sound Picture" signals that critics and filmgoers in Shanghai actually felt these events were inaugurating a new era of film.

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[311] Xia Yan, "Yousheng Dianying de Qiantu," *Xia Yan Quanji* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Wenyi Chubanshe, 2005), Vol. 6: 1.

While other studios (especially M.G.M. and Warner Bros.) were also involved in establishing the global paradigm for sound film production techniques, Xia Yan singles out R.K.O. in the article as the studio associated with the changes occurring in the film industry. Indeed, with its overt push to bring radio audiences to film as a model for rapid growth and profit, R.K.O. stands as an archetypal case of Hollywood's intensified investment of capital in sound technology in the face of economic crisis. From Shanghai, R.K.O. appeared to stand for the all of the things that the future of film would bring.

In his article, Xia Yan exposes the conflict between the film forms that preexisted synchronized sound—the silent film or "Movie," in Xia Yan's terms— and the extravagant spectacles that accompanied the consolidated use of sound-on-film technology. Rather than representing a new paradigm for film, his short piece expresses the conviction that these musicals (which were often called "Follies" in fan magazines of the time) while tenacious, had a temporary hold on the world of film:

> *Sound Picture*—the sound effects and the accompanying music, on the one hand the *Title* can be used to replace the "yinhua"(音画), within a certain frame of time, it could certainly replace the *Movie* of this moment but the *All talking all dancing and all singing* or the so called *100% Talking* but except for the so-called *Follies*, it is probably a temporary phenomenon.[312]

Nonetheless, the long section devoted to understanding the explosion of films that showcased new film sound technology reveals both the pervasive influence of the films upon the general public in China, as well as the fact that critiquing these films had become a major objective for leftists working in the Chinese film industry. The magazine is thus evidence that the film musical was an active site of cultural contestation for leftist cultural critics in mainland China. For these critics, these extravagant films exposed the

[312] Xia Yan, 2.

intertwining of exploitation of gender and labor underlying U.S. imperialist capital, and demonstrated that this had taken the form of an ideology and ethos deeply embedded in the American way of life. This object of critique would preoccupy Xia Yan throughout the early 1930s and Xia Yan conceived of *Cosmetics Market* from within this matrix. Moreover, instead of the seamlessness of audiovisuality that Hollywood presented, the conflict of sound and image was the material through which Xia Yan and his fellow leftist screenwriters would shape revolutionary films to counter the globalization of media capital and the commodification of sexuality.

Later in the same year that *Cosmetics Market* went into theaters in China, Xia Yan continued to take on the Hollywood musical in the press. In a review for the newspaper *Chen Bao,* he interrogates *Gold Diggers of 1933*, remarking on the affective and sensory confusion that it inflicts upon an audience. Xia Yan is especially attuned to a dissonance that materializes out of the film's musical performances. The leading paragraph of the review expresses the conflict of emotions through which American music exhibits the crises of capital:

> Having listened to the sentimental song of Joan Blondell, and from the time I stood up from my comfortable seat, my emotions were confused between a gloominess and wry humor. I look down at the playbill and see the printed title 'A Song and Dance for Prosperity' [313]

The article shows Xia Yan's awareness of the contradictions that the music of the Hollywood talkies conveyed to the ears of the Chinese public. Xia Yan's review of *The Gold Diggers of 1933* is particularly sensitive to the ways in which capital itself inheres

[313] Xia Yan, "*Gewu Shengping* Wo Ping," Vol. 6: 87. Xia Yan is referring to the final number of the film, "Remember My Forgotten Man," and is dumbfounded by the way in which the sadness of the film's finale performance by Joan Blondell and Etta Moten Barnett conflicts with the poetic idiom used as the film's title in Chinese ("Singers and Dancers Rise to the Stage"), a phrase which conveys singing and dancing in celebration of peace and prosperity.

in the film because it is a *sound* film: listing *The King of Jazz* (1930), The *Show of Shows* (1929), *The Gold Diggers of Broadway* (1929) he states that "in the short time in which sound films have been commodities (商品), we have seen a rich uniting of song and dance in these films," but goes on to write that *The Gold Diggers of 1933* and *42nd Street* appear to carry aggressive ideological undertones when viewed by audiences in China. He ends the review with an assertion that the films constitute a form of imperialist aggression: "it is very clear that these films expose the very bones of the trumpets and drums of the resurgence of a powerful movement of Americanism as a kind of powerful weapon!"[314]

Xia Yan's reviews of this period are situated in a context of hybridization of stage, radio and film industries. Indeed, as Xia Yan suggested in his earlier piece, the "trumpets and drums" of R.K.O. Radio Films served as an emblem through which audiences in China understood effects of industrial film production that used synchronized film sound to shock while it also presented the specter of the threatening confluence of streams of global capital.

The transition to synchronized sound was a long and messy process. The boom in synchronized sound films that began in 1929 was ultimately a result of infusions of investment by capitalists enriched by the music and recording industry that sought to extend the worldwide popularity of radio into the medium of film. Fittingly for a medium that began as an inseparable part of capitalist speculation, this boom was also followed by a bust that nearly sunk R.K.O. films after its initial gambit. As Rick Altman and Richard Abel note, numerous highly effective synchronized sound film technologies had existed

[314] Xia Yan, 87.

since the end of the nineteenth century, but narrative film form seemed alien to sound accompaniment until the success of *The Jazz Singer*.[315] Richard Jewell notes that R.K.O. was a "child of the sound revolution," and the association it created between film and radio had global reach.[316] The company's development thus serves as a thumbnail sketch of the forces of capital that coalesced to launch immersive sound films onto global screens within the space of two to three years—an event that sent shockwaves through local film industries still in the delicate initial stages of development in cities outside of the U.S. and Europe. The careers of David O. Selznick, Samuel Goldwyn, Eddie Cantor, and the final of days of vaudeville producer Florenz Ziegfeld, were intertwined with the early years of the R.K.O. studio in its mission to merge the media of radio and film. Founder David Sarnoff summed up the enterprise of merging the two industries, writing first of the marvels of the invisible global reach of radio and then insisting that this could be deployed worldwide with film for the "radio...is on the ocean, aboard ship, in the home; it is now entering the theatre through the development of talking motion picture. Electrical science has finally synchronized sound and motion on the screen."[317]

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[315] Altman and Abel attribute this change to cultural factors related to "synchronization's representational status" writing that although sync-sound technology proliferated in the U.S.A., Britain, Germany and Japan, in the early decades nineteenth century "cinema was turning from short vaudeville attractions to longer narrative films, synchronized sound was almost wholly identified with shorter forms and the reproduction of live acts, rather than the production of complex stories through editing." While Altman and Abel observations to the ways in which the cultural context shaped perceptions of film and sound functioned within separate media, the trend towards sound films that began with the collaboration between Western Electric (the precursor to the AT&T company) and Warner Bros., and which culminated in the production of *The Jazz Singer,* makes clear the enormous efforts that industrialists made to destroy these cultural perceptions through the sheer force of capital. See Rick Altman and Richard Abel, "Introduction," Film History 11, No. 4
(1999): 395-397.

[316] Richard Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan is Born*, 11-14.

[317] David Sarnoff, ""The Development of the Radio Art and Radio Industry Since 1920," *Radio Industry: The Story of its Development*, ed. Jacob Anton de Haas (Chicago: Show, 1928), 105.

In Shanghai, R.K.O.'s promotion of synchronized film as a radio-enhanced medium found imitators in ventures like Lin Zecang's *Radio Movie Daily News* (*Diansheng Ribao*), a widely circulated film fan magazine. Lin's business acumen was fully on display in the tabloids and entertainment magazines under his ownership, which tapped into an array of global cultural trends. Liying Sun calls Lin a "cultural broker," as she explores the overlapping problems of the gendering of editorial voice and the circulation of female nudes in Lin's publications.[318] The stylization and imagery of *Radio Movie Daily* dovetailed with another of Lin's magazine ventures, a women's magazine called *Linglong* that offered fashion and dating advice. *Linglong* served as a venue for advertisements of cosmetics brands that were also owned by the magazine's parent company, Lin Zecang's Sanhe Company. The magazine was thus an instrumental part of an interconnected larger profit-making enterprise that capitalized on women aspiring to globalized images of modern femininity. Louise Edwards has observed that all aspects of the magazine were conceived with an eye towards commercial success and highlights the differences between *Linglong* and women's magazines also published in Shanghai during this period that were devoted to raising women's political consciousness, such as *Women's Life Magazine* [妇女杂志].[319]

Lin Zecang's fusion of ventures with cosmetics sales underscore the great political and commercial power inherent in conceptions of women's beauty in 1930s Shanghai, the same cultural phenomenon that Xia Yan seized upon with the project of

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[318] Sun Liying, "Engendering a Journal: Editors and Nudes in Linloon Magazine and Its Global Context," *Women and the Periodical Press in China's Long Twentieth Century: A Space of their Own?* eds. Hockx, Michel, Joan Judge, and Barbara Mittler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 57.
[319] See Louise Edwards, "The Shanghai Modern Woman's American Dreams: Imagining America's Depravity to Produce China's 'Moderate Modernity'" *Pacific Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (2012), 567-601.

writing *Cosmetics Market*. Much like the unscrupulous male owners of the department store in which the protagonist works, Lin Zecang was one of many capitalists making big money from constructing and selling ideals of women's beauty. The design of Lin's *Radio Movie Daily* perfectly exhibits the concatenation of capitalist cultural formations that Xia Yan's film was designed to interrupt. The magazine shows the gendered aesthetics surrounding the merging of radio and film. The masthead of the magazine (Fig. 13), displays the chain of connections between sound, image and body with a horn speaker, bolts of electricity and geometrically of semi-nude Rockette-like dancers in mid-kick. The Rockettes were at the height of their popularity in 1932, which was the year that they moved their performance into the R.K.O. headquarters at Radio City Music Hall in New York. The masthead thus cements an association between Lin Zecang's magazine and the R.K.O. entertainment empire. These images of electrified semi-nude bodies, lightning and visualizations of sound waves speak to the association between radio, film, and sex appeal that motion pictures conjured up within consciousness of the Chinese public—a global cultural current that films both produced and exploited and into which Lin hoped to tap.

Figure 4.13 *Radio Movie Daily News* (*Diansheng Ribao*) Masthead January and July 1934

Lin's magazine also shows that in becoming consumers of synchronized sound films, mainland Chinese film audiences were making sense of two faces of the version of modernity disseminated by U.S. capital: the proliferation of technologically reproduced sound and the display of images of women's bodies.

Imagined retrospectively from our current period of apparent total integration of sound and image, Chinese leftist intellectuals' resistance to film sound technology may seem strange, conservative or nostalgic. But it is no wonder, when viewed from within a historical conjuncture in which recorded sound and moving image media were becoming

forcibly fused, that leftist Chinese filmmakers grew opposed to synchronized sound as a matter of political principle. The dominant transnational commercial media empires in the world in the 1920s and 1930s were based in the distribution of music and, particularly with wireless communication medium of radio, sound seemed to possess the quality of dissolving national borders. Music was an infectious medium for cultural influence and, in particular, deep anxieties formed as jazz-related dance genres captivated urbanites in cities across the world. Technologically reproduced sound thus frequently appeared as an arm and agent of new modes of imperialism.

Scenes of the market in *Cosmetics Market*—in this case, the department store—exhibit Xia Yan's concern with the political ideologies introduced by synchronized sound. Through sonic intertexts, the film expresses a theme that the filmmakers would reiterate throughout the film: music was an invisible influence that had embedded itself deeply within a cultural life of an urban environment that had become fused to global capital at the level of the senses. The musical samples are drawn from American popular films of 1931 and thus the songs were already familiar to filmgoing audiences. In fact, Chinese audiences could buy sheet music for Hollywood films at the newsstand in dedicated magazines like *Gequ Qinghua*, *Dianying Xingge*, and *Yintan Mingge.* However, ripped from their original cinematic context, the songs subtly invoke the menace of U.S. cultural hegemony—a force of dislocation and alienation that suffuses and saturates the physical space of commerce—especially insofar as these songs have circulated through an entertainment industry fusing radio and film to create immersive sensory and ideological experiences.

Before the film cuts to the department store, and the audience hears the first phrases of Hollywood film music, a title card narrates the upcoming scene: that the shots that follow will depict shopgirls surrounded by customers buying liquor when Supervisor Lin chimes in with the firm conviction that economic power should not be ceded to foreigners ["利权外溢"]. The title card is accompanied by a sequence of non-diegetic music driven by the rhythm of drum and clappers against a background melody of layered erhu and pipa. The music is in the style of the pit music of Wuxi opera during moments of high drama. This is the theme song of the film which also accompanies the opening credits. Abruptly, the next scene begins with an image of a spinning Santa Claus bauble into accompanied by strains of steel guitar in a foxtrot rhythm (Figure 4.14). The music continues as an accompaniment to an opening pan that shows the counters and sales floor space of the department store. This diegetic music suffuses the department store space and unstable wall between diegetic and nondiegetic may be at the very heart of the effect that the film creates for the audience. The scene invokes what Robyn Stillwell calls the "fantastical gap," taking place after a transition from the extradiegetic abstract shot of the title card, the following scene unfolds within the vaster "geography of a soundscape" that moves the experiential beyond the observable.[320] This point of transition thus acts as a point of entry to imagining the abstract systems of exchange underlying global capital, a political economy entailed in the rhythms of the foxtrot.

[320] Robyn Stillwell, "The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic," *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, eds. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 184-187.

Fig. 4.14 The title card (left) is accompanied by a rhythmically-driven Wuxi Opera-influenced (锡剧) tune that will recur throughout the film's narrative title cards. The scene opens (right) with bars steel guitar playing the melody of the globally popular song "Kokohi," as the camera focuses on a spinning Santa Claus bauble.

The song that plays in the store is in the style popularized by Sol Hoopii and His Novelty Quartet, a group that was recorded in Hawaii and whose records were distributed by Columbia/EMI in East Asia (the two companies merged in 1931). The song in the film is "Kokohi," originally recorded in 1913 by Ben Waiaiole and the Hawaiian Quintette. John Troutman explains that after decades of recordings by native Hawaiiwan artists for local audiences the musical style took off as a trend that spanned the sound and film entertainment industries after the Biltmore Trio recorded a Hawaiian-influenced album in 1928.[321] The sound took Hollywood by storm and an upshot of the fad was the incorporation of the trios work into dozens of film soundtracks. In *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the U.S. Empire*, Adria Imada links the boom in the popularity of musical forms culturally appropriated from Hawaiian music to orientalism and imperialism. She writes that media forms contributed to "gendered and sexualized conquest through regimes of representation." She explains the music as a cultural front of colonialism: "the Pacific was made 'pacific' through the aestheticization of its women,

[321] John Troutman, *Kīkā kila: How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed the Sound of Modern Music* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 137-138.

who were exposed quite literally in Western portraiture as beautiful and sexually available."[322]

The introduction of the viewer to the space of the department store with the visual icon of Christmas in European cultures (and religious practices that have become a vehicle for hyperbolic consumption) presents this appropriated music within other signs of hegemonic culture that have been subsumed by capital. These uses of Hollywood sound create an ethical focus for the film as a whole: the viewer is allowed free rein for pleasure in and play with sonic commodities of Hollywood cultural hegemony on display, but the viewer is still afforded critical distance within which they can maintain a political consciousness while enjoying the film cinematically. In other words, the film aims to foster audience entertainment within an ethics of responsibility for national welfare against imperialist aggression.

In the department store, customers inquire into the cost and availability of foreign-made brand names. Wang Ruilan (Ai Xia), a stylish young shopgirl—on the clock, but indifferent to the business in the store—looks on at a transaction that is taking place from behind the counter. Suddenly she hears a phrase of music that spontaneously causes her to start to dance.

[322] Adria Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the U.S. Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 12.

Figure 4.15 Music moves bodies: Wang Ruilan (played by Ai Xia) spontaneously dances to strains of music in the store.

The scene is a source of light humor in the plot as the dancing coincides with entrance of the supervisor, who catches the employee mid-dance practicing her foxtrot on company time. Linking the tedious labor of retail—and the way that such labor squandered the energy of young bodies—it serves as a reminder of how music captures the body and mind in a way that eludes conscious thought. This short anomalous sequence thus connects the young dancing body to a range of new formations of public prompted by consumer capitalism that will recur throughout the film.

The tensions between diegetic and nondiegetic components give the audience an exercise in viewing and listening practices, inviting affective and sensory involvement. The film thus offers a form of narrative cinema that breaks with illusionist paradigms employed by Hollywood: the film's composition inhibits a cinematic experience that takes place at the level of fantasy, but also resists the possible loss of viewer attention in more didactically driven films. A final anomalous detail—which today comes across as a ghostlike reminder of the deliberate hand of the filmmakers in arranging the film's

music—comes in what sounds like an off-screen presence humming the steel-guitar melody and occurs on a separate track of the film that sounds close to the viewer, just as the young shopgirl begins to dance sound (at approximately runtime 16:15 when viewed on the preserved print at 24-30 fps). Perhaps intended to add additional realism of multi-dimensional background crowd noise at the time of film production, this effect achieves an even greater reality effect in the preserved film as a break in the diegesis that glimpses the imperfect assemblage of sound elements in the locally produced emerging recording technology.

Phrases of the rumba "Manisero," or "The Peanut Vendor," likely in a version recorded by Cuban singer Rita Montaner, float through the background of the second department store scene. As a singer discovered and commercialized by Columbia Records in the 1920s, the Montaner connects the film to peripheral global spaces of imperial exploitation in Latin America and calls up the racialized commodities of the Hollywood culture industries. Through music, the scene gives a palpable sense of the ways in which commodified music brought distant places with shared experiences of colonialism into proximity through an intimacy and familiarity that worked upon the senses of an audience. Just as Ai Xia's body moves unconsciously to the rhythms of the music in the previous scene, the tastes and reactions of urban audiences to music can also become a source of subversive of transnational movements of culture.

Nonetheless, the popularity of the song in 1932 and the way that it was rerouted through Hollywood forms a more direct reference for the audience of the ways in which race and poverty were commodified and exoticized. In particular, the version that is sung by Lupe Vélez in the 1931 film *Cuban Love Song* (dir. W.S. Van Dyke). Lupe Vélez had

enjoyed great popularity as a film star since the late-1920s in mainland China and the film was well-publicized across the country in the year before *Cosmetics Market* was produced (see, for example, Figure 4.16 which shows Lupe Vélez and Lawrence Tibbett in a scene from the film in a Beijing film magazine).[323] The scene featuring the "Peanut Vendor" song exoticizes and infantilizes Vélez. In the scene, Vélez and Lawrence Tibbett sit in a tree and she flirtatiously teaches Tibbett the song. She translates the lyrics for the fawning Tibbett: "A little housewife...do not let me go...or you'll be sorry." Tibbett plays a brawny baritone-voiced military officer escaping the pressures of upper-class life in the United States. While on shore leave in Cuba, he falls in love with a poor local peanut vendor, played by Vélez. The song conjures up American colonial ideologies of expressed in terms of gender, class and race. [324]

Figure 4.16 Lupe Vélez and Lawrence Tibbett in a still from *Cuban Love Love Song* in *Beijing Huabao*, Sept. 10, 1932. The pair are featured in the newspaper alongside stories on other recent Hollywood hits, including a re-release of Fred Niblo's 1925 Ben Hur with an added soundtrack.

[323] *Cuban Love Song*, directed by W.S. Van Dyke (1931; Atlanta. GA: Turner Library).
[324] At the time of its release, the film also faced boycotts in Cuba due to what Cubans perceived to be disparaging portrayal of the island and its people. See "'Cuban Love Song' Protested in Havana," *New York Times*, Dec. 19, 1931.

The third sonic intertext played in the department story scenes of *Cosmetics Market* is a song originally featured within the 1931 musical *Palmy Days*.[325] The film starred Eddie Cantor and musical numbers were choreographed by Busby Berkeley. The recording was released upon the film's debut with the song distributed by Victor and performed by the Eddie Arnheim and His Coconut Orchestra. In the film, the song appears within a Berkeley-designed number in which a group exercise routine in the "Goldwyn Gym" becomes one of Berkeley's signature elaborate and multilayered visual patterning of the bodies of dancers. Within *Cosmetics Market*, the song thus ironically recalls Hollywood's function in creating desire and pleasure around the shaping of bodies, both symbolically in terms of deindividualized labor for global markets and in the real fashioning of the bodies of stars for global film markets. The song adds an ironic twist to the soundtrack of *Cosmetics Market* by calling up the destructive social imperatives underlying Hollywood entertainment products.

The lines from "Bend Down Sister" are clearly intelligible in the third department store scene in *Cosmetics Market*:

You've got to bend down, sister,
Bend down, sister,
If you want to keep thin,
No more messing,
With French dressing,
Sister, you'll have to bear it and grin,
You can flirt with noodle soup,
Sniff but don't dare give in..

[325] *Palmy Days*, directed by A. Edward Sutherland (1931; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2015), DVD.

Bend down, sister
Bend down, sister
If you want to keep thin.

The scene depicts a group of chorus-line dancers, played by the Goldwyn Girls, who work in a bakery and must contend with temptations to eat that might affect their figures. Ostensibly about physical fitness, the scene—and the entire film, essentially—follows many Goldwyn musicals of this era in creating a visual field inviting an unrestrained male gaze. Ancillary to the film's narrative about a criminal defrauding the bakery, the women undergo a threefold objectification: first, as a submissive gendered labor force; second, as what Siegfried Kracauer has called a "mass ornament," they become a mechanical part of the film's mise-en-scène; and, lastly, while their bodies are disciplined to make them more attractive to the male eye.

One of the biggest grossing films of 1931, the film's advertisements bragged of its nearly million-dollar budget. According to Richard Barrios, critics of the time saw the blend of raciness and comedy in the picture as relief for the miseries of the economic depression.[326] Busby Berkeley's most elaborate choreography in the film involves the control and synchronization of mass movements of women's bodies by a female coach in the bakery's gymnasium (see Figure 4.17). The scene shows a group of female dancers, with the implication that they must mold their bodies to the standard of the commodified beauty set by the entertainment industry. The soundtrack of *Cosmetics Market* thus draws on a film that both sells women's bodies (and voices) for profit. In *Cosmetics Market*, the

[326] Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: Birth of the Musical Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 346-350.

song plays in the background of the cosmetics counter to suggest the ideological grounds that this market for beauty is built upon.

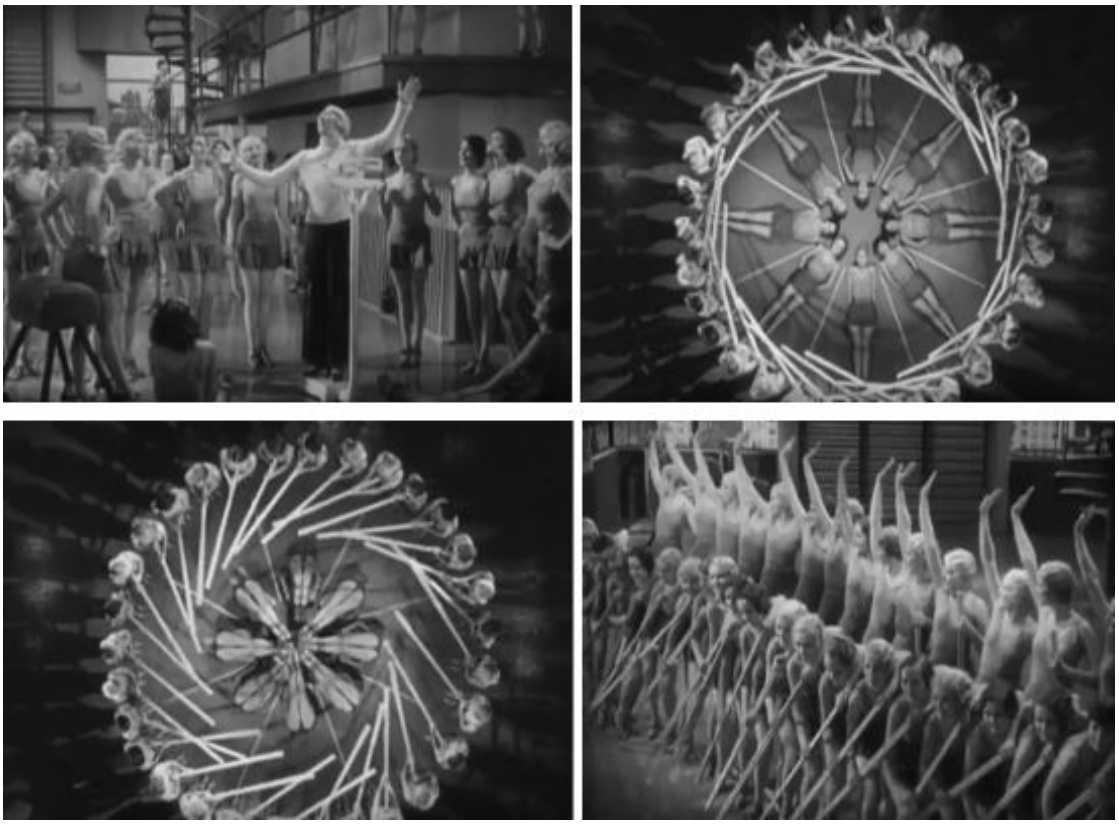

Figure 4.17 Busby Berkeley's "Bend Down Sister" number in *Palmy Days*

While seemingly good, clean fun to American audiences, viewed through the eyes of a young communist in mainland China, and one with profound convictions about capitalism's exploitation of women, the scene might have spurred Xia Yan's condemnation of Hollywood musicals in his 1933 article in which he described "Americanism as a kind of powerful weapon."[327] Through these sonic intertexts, Xia Yan's own film absorbs intertwining cultural imperatives over race, class and gender that underlie the imperialistic reach of the American culture industries.

[327] Xia Yan, "*Gewu Shengping* Woping," *Xia Yan Quanji*, Vol. 6: 85.

Xia Yan's protagonist Li Cuifen's revolutionary gestures in the face of workplace oppression stand in direct opposition to representations of women submitting to exploitation for the pleasure of male viewers. While Hollywood provides an ideal of a working woman who will heed the call of "Bend Down, Sister" and compromise self and body for patriarchal capital, *Cosmetics Market* moves quickly from scenes of labor in the department store—in which these songs figure as an element of the commercial setting—towards a conclusion in which Li Cuifen rejects men in both business and love. The dissonance introduced by the songs communicates a radically different ethical outlook to an audience used to totalizing logic of capital extolled by Hollywood's big studios. The ending of *Cosmetics Market* that Xia Yan penned in the screenplay differs from the final cut of the film in that Zhang Shichuan gave the film an additional final scene in which Li Cuifen starts her own business. However, without this happy ending the original conception of the film illustrates an envisioning of a different social space that Chinese communists sought to invent, beyond systems of global capital. Xia Yan's screenplay ends on a moment of rupture in which Li Cuifen exits the store, proudly lifts her head, and goes out to enter the crowd on the street. The former love interest that has left her, Qian Guohua, runs after her, but the screenplay ends inconclusively with an ellipsis. Although it does not offer a clear resolution, in this version, the audience is left with the certainty of Li Cuifen's break from circuits of exploitation and the knowledge that she will lead and the man will follow.

Highly conscious of the political economy of sound, the design of the film shows sound as the terrain of Xia Yan's resistance to the global capital of audiovisual media industries. The end of the film that Xia Yan intended exemplifies his attention to

moments in which silence (especially as a level of aural sensation) can tell the whole story. Moreover, the scene resonates beyond its own era into future formal techniques in mainland Chinese film. In Xia Yan's version of the film, Hu Die's fierce glance to the horizon in a pose that prefigures Stephanie Hemelryk Donald identifies as the "socialist realist gaze." (Figure 4.18).[328]

Figure 4.18 Li Cuifen's exit from the department store: A fierce glance towards a new future.

Conclusion: Sound and Image on the Revolutionary Road

As a rapidly globalized modern commodity, recorded sound held promise for international political solidarity and danger in the way it contagiously united masses into audiences. The most compelling aspects of *Cosmetics Market*'s innovative sound design

[328] Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 62.

emerge in the film's encounter with Hollywood film musicals. Xia Yan's focus on revolutionizing film sound intensified during the increasingly close relationship that he formed with Nie Er and Tian Han in the year following the production of *Cosmetics Market*. In many ways, the relationship of the three formed around a common political goal to resist the new forms of imperialism emanating from Europe and the United States on the radio waves. These shared objectives that would ultimately result in their most memorable collaboration in Diantong's 1935 *Children of Troubled Times*, a film that deployed sound film technology to reinforce the passions of patriotic militancy of young Chinese against the Japanese invasion. The end of the film famously features the song that would become the national anthem of the PRC, written by Xia Yan, Nie Er, and Tian Han.

The essay "Notes from a Film Novice," published in *Chen Bao* only three months after the release of *Cosmetics Market,* Xia Yan argues for Chinese filmmakers to fulfill cinema's task as the ultimate "mass art" (最大众的艺术). Xia Yan worries about the ways that sound in film eludes an audience's conscious participation in a film and presents subtitles as a technique to bring sound back under the filmmaker's control. Faced with a global cultural menace unleashed upon Chinese audiences by American capital—that, through sound, could make its way into the very bodies of audiences—Xia Yan is ultimately exploring the power of the writer and writing to counteract these effects.

Much earlier than Theodor Adorno, who in a 1960 essay presented writing as a response to frustrations with the reality-effect through which film moves audiences, Xia Yan proposed writing as a way to revolutionize cinema, exploring the uses of the subtitle

that could have the effect of what Jacques Lacan described as "the instance of the letter."[329] While Adorno in the 1960 essay saw montage as "akin to writing," comparing cinematography montage practices to "the magic lantern slides of our childhood...[a] discontinuity of …movement," Xia Yan's 1933 article embraces the use of subtitles and Xia Yan references Soviet film director Timoshenko's book *The Art of Film and Film Editing* (1926) to suggest that subtitles allow the filmmaker to address audiences on a plane of consciousness rather than ideology.[330] The passage is noteworthy in two regards. The first is that in studying the Soviet use of subtitles, Xia Yan comes close to discovering the effect of filmic text and title sequences that is used by contemporary documentary filmmakers. Indeed, the most persistently poignant elements of Xia Yan's *Spring Silkworms* are the moments in which it shifts towards this kind of documentary filmmaking. The second is less immediate but is borne out in Chinese film history. Although subtitles may have seemed a solution that was close at hand following the era of silent film, through screenwriting and in the writing of film reviews Xia Yan established a new creative and professional role for the writer that would become an integral part of the film production process in mainland China. However, this also meant that the radical aspects of his writing would quickly become absorbed within state bureaucracy: Not only did Xia Yan's work as a screenwriter become a model for film

[329]As noted earlier, Michel Chion has noted that "synch points" in a sound film act as a "*point de caption,"* technical or formal elements that stabilize the meaning of the film's narrative. Considering Xia Yan's insistence that writing may counter this effect, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories may provide a way of understanding the power of the literal to establish the force of collective awareness in the dream-like and individualized distraction induced by movies. See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 412-444.

[330] Theodor Adorno, "Transparencies on Film," trans. Thomas Y. Levin in *New German Critique* 24-25 (Fall-Winter 1981), 201.

writing in CPC-controlled film production, as a Minister of Culture in the 1950s and 1960s, Xia Yan's writings on film carried the weight of party policy.

In the 1930s however, Xia Yan's work in film exhibits that his innovations were not purely based on nationalistic motives. Instead, he sought to intervene within global cultural practices of cinema. He viewed a deficiency and flaw within the forms of spectatorship that Hollywood's recent exploitation had cultivated. In the *Chen Bao* article on Hollywood musicals, Xia Yan also writes, "the general modern audience still lacks a straightforward or sufficient understanding of 'the language of visuality" (视觉的语言). He follows this by saying that film audiences are still in a transitional period, that "sound dialogue films are under such conditions that because *all types* of audiences are not able to make the leap into this kind of maturity, and the skills of a general audience for understanding film form is still exceptionally weak" (italics are mine).[331] *Cosmetics Marke*t shows Xia Yan attempting to foster politically conscious spectatorship in order to create a film industry that engaged an audience at the level of both sight and sound, both in China and beyond its borders.

The scene of Li Cuifen's revolutionary glance to the horizon also indicates the direction of Xia Yan's political activism beyond the production of *Cosmetics Market*. The scene anticipates the work of creating revolutionary film music that Xia Yan engaged in the following year with Tian Han and Nie Er. Rather than contending with Hollywood's audiovisual hegemony for a share of the local filmgoing audience, their collaboration was fully dedicated to the creation of a militant nationalist sounds that would produce a new mass audience. As Andrew Jones notes in *Yellow Music*, the mass

[331] Xia Yan, "*Gewu Shengping* Woping," *Xia Yan Quanji*, Vol. 6: 85-87.

music that Nie Er and Tian Han sought to produce "as much as visual media such as newsreels and newsprint[,]...helped to engender as well as nationalize the very masses that is soundscapes purport to describe...leftist musicians attempted to represent the masses in their music and to market these representations to them by way of the mass media."[332] With *Children of Troubled Times,* Xia Yan moved his work as a cultural provocateur fully into the sublime ideological space envisioned in his final scene of *Cosmetics Market*—he became involved in the revolutionary project of the construction of a new idea of nation. As part of the newly formed Diantong Company—a film company organized under leftist political principles—and again collaborating with Situ Huimian, the film is the story of young people that desire love, but ultimately join the militant resistance to Japan's imperialist invasion.

The Diantong company was founded in 1934 and headed by Situ Yimin, brother of sound technician Situ Huimin and a figure at the forefront of film sound technology in China. In first years of the 1930s, Situ Yimian was an engineer and inventor whose company *Sanyou* had designed the first sound-on-film recording technologies made within China the *Sanyoushi*. The final montage sequence of *Children of Troubled Times* plays like a celebration, an anthem to the newfound sovereignty of China's sound film industry. The shots in the sequence focus on instruments—a drum and a trumpet—and then move to capture singing faces of the youth on the march, with their heads held to the sky (Figure 4.19).

[332] Andrew Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 111.

Figure 4.19 The Masses Sing "Song of the Volunteers." The Final Montage Sequence of *Children of Troubled Times*.[333]

While the scenes are the joint product of the collaboration of Xia Yan's leftist comrades—and an accomplishment of the director of Xu Xingzhi—the final montage of *Children of Troubled Times* is an audiovisual culmination of Xia Yan's convictions over the revolutionary potential of film sound. The ideas on film sound that Xia Yan had first formed in his critique of Hollywood musicals in *The Arts* and *Chen Bao*, and that had formed the basis of his initial exploration of film sound in *Cosmetics Market*, come to fruition in the final scene of *Children of Troubled Times*. The very logic of this final montage—the syntax of the sequence that moves from shots of drum to trumpet and then from faces to feet—conveys that the sounds come first and unite the people as one mass. First come the sounds of revolution, then the boots marching on the ground inevitably follow.

[333] *Children of Troubled Times* (*Feng Yun Er Nü*), directed by Xu Xingzhi (1935; Guangdong Tian Ren Film and Sound Broadcast Limited Company 2006), DVD.

Conclusion

Cinematic Modernism and Decentered Film History

> "It is no longer necessary to go to Shanghai"
>
> Roberto Arlt, "*El Expreso de Shanghai* correntino," *El Mundo*, Sept. 12, 1933

Traveling on a narrow-gauge railway in the city of Corrientes, in the far northern region of Argentina on the border of Paraguay, Roberto Arlt brought with him a typewriter, a camera, and vivid memories of films he had seen in his favorite movie theater in the Flores neighborhood of Buenos Aires. In the course of exploring this little-known corner of his country and reporting back to the newspaper that he worked for as a regular columnist, he frequently referred to cinema to communicate the sights and sounds of the hinterland for his readers. Film serves him well in this endeavor, but all throughout these pieces, his thoughts on film wander towards problems of modern human experience mediated by cinema as a cultural form whose ways of knowledge and practice emanate from the centers of cultural hegemony within the United States. Arlt encounters the train that he has "seen again Shanghai Express, but not sculpted in shadows, but instead in a reality of hard contours and vibrant colors like oxidized metal." The piece ends with a rugged train ride, upon which Arlt states "It's no longer necessary to travel to Shanghai." The statement is primarily a joke on the rustic nature of the ride—Argentines don't have to travel far to meet adventures like those on offer in the virtual world of the film—but Arlt's droll comparison leaves the lingering impression that the global culture that has emerged around film has somehow irrevocably changed our experience of the world. The piece sends the message that in becoming modern and urban in the ways that Hollywood

has so effectively transmitted, the world has irretrievably entered into a place of make believe and every experience is forever preceded by cinematic cliché.

Nonetheless, the initial encounter with the past also presents a point of departure towards a new destination. Unlike the movie, his train is not composed of shadows but has shape, color, and texture. As with many of Arlt's writings, the reader is left ambivalent but hopeful. In the modern era, it may only be possible to think through a cinematic imagination—what Arlt called observations based in "cinematographic vision"—but this imagination may recreate the world, especially in ways that resist the endless abstractions, the shadows, of cinema under the control of the hegemony of the global culture industries. For Arlt, this means realizing the small revolution of an area of Argentina creating its own nationally owned rail system, a miniature modernization effort made in the face of the invasion of imperialist British enterprises that had monopolized the Argentine rail system for decades. Inspired by the shadows of cinema to rethink what was before him, Arlt is struck by the "hard contours and vibrant colors" of everyday life in his country. The scene may not have the aura of danger and mystery of von Sternberg's spectacle, but this is precisely the point. Embracing the "cinematographic vision," Arlt creates an experience of the world around him that is a modernity richly infused with the social history of Argentina. Cinema in Arlt's hands becomes decoupled from the placelessness instituted by the free flow of Hollywood capital.

In *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, Néstor García Canclini warns of:

> the threat posed by the globalist market: the reduction of art to a discourse of planetary reconciliation. The standardized versions of world film and music, of the 'international style' in the visual arts and literature...suspend the tension of what gets communicated and what gets torn apart, between what gets globalized

> and what insists on difference or is banished to the margins of the world system.[334]

Each writer in my study works to break apart this movement towards suspended tension, or "reconciliation." This project began as an attempt to identify and organize the connections between two of the largest centers of film production and consumption outside the United States and Europe in the early years of the twentieth century. Over the course of uncovering, translating, and analyzing hundreds of texts by the writers whose ideas on film and culture are collected here, the project has become a history of two very different but intimately related fights to resist all forms of globalized culture that aim towards "planetary reconciliation." The interlinked cultural fronts that these robust working-class intellectuals on the periphery represent in their respective cities never sought reconciliation, they sought agency over their own representation and agency to create their own representations of the world. As such, their ideas lead to an explicit critique of recent approaches to understanding global cinema and world literature that attempt to fold their efforts into a linear historical narrative of global social transformation.

Hollywood's exported films clearly presented foreign audiences the fetishized aesthetic objects linked to racist and imperialist ideologies of an ostensibly benevolent global domination. Writers, artists, dramatists, musicians, poets, and photographers responded stridently with radical new sounds and images that called this make-believe world into question. Although often obscured by the works of elite writers from East Asia or South America that translate or travel better into the anglophone sphere, these authors push against a reconciling or forgetting of their rebellious dissent. The work of Alfonsina

[334] Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, xliv.

Storni, Xia Yan, Roberto Arlt, and Mao Dun makes small advances towards a people's art as the foundation of a national cultural life with an international awareness. In many ways, especially within institutional history, reconciling and forgetting are largely the same process.

Cinema became a globalized media form not long after its invention. The first film was screened in China in 1896 and the first local films were produced in the years before 1910. In Argentina, the first film screened the same year and the first local film was made in 1901. Film and photography were quickly embraced within the everyday life of cities and, as Arlt reminds us, also became salient feature of life in the smaller towns in the country where cinema both created and satisfied a hunger for other national and international spaces. From the initial moments of cinema's establishment within national cultures, artists were inspired by it and sought to institute cinematic forms of creativity that linked up more closely with the vision of the world that they experienced from where they stood. Beginning in the late 1920s, the urgent need to strike against the globalized film presented itself clearly to radical intellectuals. The intensified push of capital into film that occurred around the time of the full synchronization of sound and ended with the first color film technologies also coincides with the globally reverberating boom and bust of capital that produced the Great Depression in the United States. In a desperate grasp of the slippery ideologies of liberalism, which ultimately was merely a framing of the pursuit of power and profit at the expense of the poor, U.S. film companies consolidated into global cartels and the United States government assisted studios in bringing greater volumes of Hollywood exports to vast urban publics abroad. Local

resistance grew in direct response to the money spent and the power exerted by the spreading U.S. culture industry.

This de-globalized and decentered history of these years of cinema culture thereby gives the comparativist historian of culture a lens to investigate international connections and sympathies beyond Europe or North America. The collected responses to Hollywood's rise towards a consolidated global culture industry form an international cultural response in which Shanghai and Buenos Aires see each other through the lens of cinema but their messages remain fragmented, discontinuous, and disparate. The shared responses to *Shanghai Express* on either side of the world demonstrate common political sympathies on the left and at the periphery and would eventually grow into categorically different social movements with compatible worldviews. By 1968, both Argentina and Shanghai were in the midst of profound cultural changes that came about as a consequence of the local development of theories of socialism and mass culture that had their origins with these 1930s writers. This study thus captures cultural movements that vibrantly express the notion that global studies of culture must primarily engage with "what gets communicated and what gets torn apart" and "what insists on difference or is banished to the margins of the world system."

For intellectuals creating local forms of modernism within emerging cultural fronts in Shanghai and Buenos Aires, the focus of energies became the commodity—Alfonsina Storni and Xia Yan were deeply involved in capturing and reworking these seemingly chaotic commodities set loose by Hollywood. Roberto Arlt and Mao Dun took up this approach to a lesser extent, but they also possessed keen eyes for the ways in which mass consumption transforms the objects of everyday life. Capital possessed the

means of production, allowing these radical intellectuals only minor incursions into filmmaking through which they might have otherwise spoken to one another. However, in their reflections on cinematic culture, these figures frequently reach common understandings of what entertainment, technology, and commodities—as well as the powerful overlapping of the three within commercial film exports—do to the modern consciousness. The U.S. culture industries sold dreams and they responded by inventing realities. In their representations of entertainment, technology, and commodities they projected back images of manipulation, coercion, and exploitation. Their interventions into cinema were a willing back into existence of alienated labor and a rematerialization of their exploited bodies. In Storni's poems, for example, we find silken shawls, cameras and film projectors, and her ideas put the power of imagining a world for these objects back into the hands of the masses. Xia Yan's experiments in sound synchronization recoded the orientalism, racism, and the globalized rootlessness that Hollywood invited audiences to revel in and returned the sounds as messages of militant resistance that paved the way for a youth united under revolutionary communist goals.

Returning to Arlt's *aguafuerte*, he conjures Hollywood film as the inspiration for his conscious impressions of place. His sketch leads the reader to imagine Corrientes as the "orient" of Argentina. Arlt thus chronicles Hollywood's role in constructing displaced and disappointing fantasies and he thus locates the felt sources of Argentine disconnection with the social reality of one's home country. Hollywood orientalized his sense of time and place. Arlt is not the intended recipient of the film's stereotyped messages, nor does it arouse his ire as it did so justifiably for Lu Xun or the demonstrators on the streets of Shanghai. However, his deeper desire to connect with

communist revolutionaries in Shanghai is glimpses in the fictional commentary added to *Los lanzallamas* and he also indicates the sinister nature of this fantasy in observations on the train. The film is "sculpted in shadows" while Corrientes is alive with color.

The importance of color to the experience of reality was soon to be compromised, too, as Storni's later assertion that one could not experience the pampa after the introduction of Kodak color film development technology. Storni's "Kodak pampeano" recalls Theodor Adorno's comment on film color in "Culture Industry Reconsidered," a dramatic moment in which Adorno locates the very problem that each of these writers were expressing in Buenos Aires and Shanghai and then leaves a reader with a sweeping indictment of globalized culture arising from film technologies:

> The most ambitious defense of the culture industry today celebrates its spirit, which might be safely called ideology, as an ordering factor. In a supposedly chaotic world it provides human beings with something like standards for orientation, and that alone seems worthy of approval. However, what its defenders imagine is preserved by the culture industry is in fact all the more thoroughly destroyed by it. The color film demolishes the genial old tavern to a greater extent than bombs ever could: the film exterminates its imago. No homeland can survive being processed by the films which celebrate it, and which thereby turn the unique character on which it thrives into an interchangeable sameness.[335]

"The color film demolishes...the film exterminates...No homeland can survive..." These comments match the ideas of each of the writers in this study brought to their extreme conclusion. However, my own study glimpses a moment when this feeling of doom was ameliorated by a revolutionary energy. What is so remarkable about each of these figures is the unflagging energy each devoted to reinventing culture, even as they carried out the menial and thankless tasks required to make ends meet in their daily lives.

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[335] Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," trans. Anson G. Rabinbach in *New German Critique* 6 (1975), 16.

What stands out in all of their work is that Hollywood and the products of the U.S. culture industries could not simply be adapted, adopted, or borrowed. The wealth displayed by the spectacle, the capital that the culture industry revealed, was simply not exchangeable. This is what I want to dwell on in order to put a fine point on the conclusion to this thesis and to respond to theories of global cinema that search for equivalencies and continuities where these do not historically exist. The creation of their own forms of cinematic modernism required them to direct all of their focused towards bringing a new vernacular for mass culture into the world.

The responses to "Americanism" in global peripheral spaces abroad reveal a much different picture of major schisms in world cinema than has been forged by film historians endorsing a concept of "vernacular modernism." The historical details that emerge in my study powerfully contrast with the picture of global cinematic modernism that scholars such as Miriam Hansen glean from examples of Hollywood form taken up in local industrial film production. Hansen describes the cinema exported by Hollywood as:

> A cultural formation that was, after all, perceived as the incarnation of *the modern,* an aesthetic medium up-to-date with Fordist-Taylorist methods of industrial production and mass consumption, with drastic changes in social, sexual, and gender relations, in the material fabric of everyday life, in the organization of sensory perception and experience...And it held that appeal not only for avant-garde artists and intellectuals in the United States and the modernizing capitals of the world (Berlin, Paris, Moscow, Shanghai, Tokyo, Sao Paulo, Sydney, Bombay) but also for emerging mass publics both at home and abroad. Whatever the economic and ideological conditions of its hegemony—and I wish by no means to discount them—classical Hollywood cinema could be imagined as a cultural practice on a par with the experience of modernity[336]

[336] Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," 64-65.

In the first place, Hansen notes "an aesthetic idiom developed in one country could achieve transnational and global currency" (59). However, the accounts in this study find in the particularities of cultural life in Shanghai and Buenos Aires that this currency was not exchangeable, or not fully so. These writers in fact viewed Hollywood currency as the source of the devaluation of life and labor in their own countries. As the introduction outlines, one primary problem with the vernacular modernism theory is that the "modernity" of Hollywood film was not based on its ostensible expansion of a Fordist-Taylorist mode of production but is instead based upon the chaotic, crisis-driven, and algorithmic movements of speculative finance capital. Hansen is correct that mass consumption was a key ingredient in the Hollywood formula, and the cycles of Hollywood commodities driving consumption reveal that investments of American finance capital were coupled with the expansionist and exceptionalist dogma of U.S. empire that met as much resistance in foreign markets as it did success.

Thus, the "global currency" of Hollywood's "aesthetic idiom" was one in which politically savvy local audiences witnessed the strange qualities of limitless multiplication always returning to its point of origin. Meanwhile, this currency devalued their own products within local markets and destroyed their social institutions from the inside as ideas of citizenship, common collective cause, and the continuity of tradition were overtaken by the freedom to buy American goods. Upon this, the artists and activists I survey sought to establish other modes of mass artistic production that would lead to a modern Chinese and Argentine society in which the people regained control of culture. Imagining a radical break with Euro-American forms of public life dominated by the incessant influence of the culture industries, these trailblazing figures of audiovisual

modernism on the global periphery theorized new ways of making mass culture with the aim of transforming social relations.

In films like *Shanghai Express*, *Bird of Paradise*, *Footlight Parade*, *The Gold Diggers of 1933*, and *Cuban Love Song*, audiences in Buenos Aires and Shanghai experienced confusing and disorienting excesses and dehumanizing visions of wealth aggrandized by Hollywood producers. While this idiom did hold appeal to great numbers of the filmgoing public all over the world, it certainly repulsed and inflamed "avant-garde artists and intellectuals...in the modernizing capitals of the world."[337] Instead of inspiring these radical intellectuals, these films stood out as active, and even militant, sites for contestation and subversion. These artists mustered all of their applied ingenuity and cultivated new forms of technical know-how in order to rework the filmic and audiovisual arts in ways that could mobilize the public. Although they did not always accomplish the goal of setting up their own filmmaking operations or studios, their work leaves a record of an alternative modernism based on principles of historical consciousness, territorial sovereignty, and the return of capital to the worker.

[337] Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses," 65.

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Shen Bao 申报

Shen Bao Yue Kan 申报月刊

Wenyi 文艺

Wenxue 文学

Xin Xueshi 新学识

Xiaoshuo Yuebao 小说月报

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Fudan University Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Reading Library and Special Collections, Shanghai, China

Museo del Cine Pablo Ducrós Hicken, Buenos Aires, Argentina

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